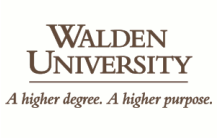

1-1-2009

The impact of enrollment in a combined reading and learning strategies course on exceptional students' FCAT Reading scale scores

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Coral Kathleen Hanson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2009

ABSTRACT

The Impact of Enrollment in a Combined Reading and Learning Strategies Course on Exceptional Students' FCAT Reading Scale Scores

by

Coral Kathleen Hanson

M.S., Wagner College, 1994
B.S., Wagner College, 1993

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University
February 2009

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that because remediation and support replace required and career-defining courses, exceptional students fall behind, ill equipped to act in society as autonomous adults. No Child Left Behind requires reading proficiency, so students failing standardized tests must take remedial courses. Individualized education plans often require support courses. However, there remains an important gap in the literature regarding the usefulness of reading, standardized testing, and leadership research to solve this problem. A class combining reading and support for students with exceptionalities exists at 1 high school. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the combined program to determine whether a specific program intended to meet federal and state performance-based standards affected test scores. This study used a single-group pretest-posttest design to analyze the 2007 and 2008 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test Reading scale scores of 25 of the 30 students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course to determine whether a significant difference existed between these test scores. The paired-sample *t* test identified a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores, supporting the hypothesis that combining remediation and support increases progress. This study would be an important contribution to the existing literature by providing a viable solution to this problem by offering more opportunities for exceptional students to enroll in courses available to their mainstream peers. It also would enhance social change initiatives by facilitating the graduation and entry into productive adulthood of students with exceptionalities, allowing them to define career interests and remediate deficiencies simultaneously.

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DEDICATION

For my favorites: my entire family; my mentors; my beautiful friends; my intelligent colleagues; my determined fellow candidates; all of my students; and especially my husband, Marc, my boys, Alexander and Max , and my mother, Kathleen. You are the people who have always reminded me of the importance of setting and achieving goals. Most of you will never read the contents of this study, but all of you have made it possible for me to achieve this academic milestone. Thank you!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

This study explored exceptional student education programs for students with mild to moderate disabilities at one central Florida high school to determine whether changes in one program impacted standardized test scores. As performance-based national and state governments study institutions using standardized test scores as a measure of success, this study was designed to show whether a specific program at one school intended to meet both federal and state standards and influence these assessments for students with mild to moderate exceptionalities was effective.

The purpose of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was to increase educational expectations by improving the academic performance of students and educating them in a manner that would enable them to function in a competitive society (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2007c). The NCLB caused the restructuring of schools, placing an emphasis on accountability and assessment to determine whether schools are successful. Although using standardized tests to determine whether schools are successful remains a controversial issue in education, the NCLB continues to hold schools accountable for student performance using these tests (Carriveau, 2006).

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is part of Florida's response to the NCLB (FLDOE, 2007a). This assessment, administered to students in Grades 3 through 11, contains criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards in math, reading, writing, and science, as well as norm-referenced tests (NRTs) in reading comprehension and math problem

solving to measure performance against national norms. Even though the first administration of the FCAT was in 1998, the origin of Sunshine State Standards and the development, administration, scoring, and reporting of the FCAT began in 1991. The 1991 School Improvement and Accountability legislation established the Florida Commission of Education Reform and Accountability and required significant changes in schools. The purpose of this legislation also was to ensure higher levels of achievement for all students, increase accountability, reward high-performing schools, and help unsuccessful ones. School boards had to identify these schools and report on the status of schools not making adequate progress. At the end of the 1990-1991 school year, 72 schools in 65 districts were not making adequate progress.

All students, including those with identified disabilities, were required to meet increasingly rigorous proficiency standards (FLDOE, 2007a), even if these proficiencies exceeded logical expectations for students with mild to moderate disabilities. For this study, limited research about how these guidelines affected students with exceptionalities was found. Because all students were held to the same proficiency requirements, or standards, there were no accommodations to the current levels of performance specified on individualized education plans (IEPs) of students with exceptionalities based on their ability to meet the standards set forth by the NCLB in 2001. In the literature review, rapid changes made in reference to student assessment and school accountability in Florida were acknowledged. Exceptional student education, remediation, and accommodations became a source of controversy because the exceptional student subgroup significantly

affected school grades and had great difficulty meeting the standards of NCLB proficiency.

According to Schön (1983), an *inquiry stance*, or a questioning "condition for the acquisition of competence" (p. 120), as well as shared leadership, causes shared responsibility for exceptional student education. Because school administrators set the tone for exceptional programs, leaders must uphold plans to instruct these students and extend expertise (Sonenblum, 2003; Thurlow, Barrera, & Zamora, 2006). Although research has provided the database, validity, and trends to problem solve (Walden University, 2007), leaders must solve the right problems to cultivate a culture of learning (Schön). Hence, problem setting becomes a principle of action; problems resolve when shared research increases progress. The NCLB (2001) set the criteria for accountability for all students, including students with exceptionalities. Therefore, comparing the pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of students with mild to moderate exceptionalities enrolled in a new program followed the assessment and accountability format. An examination of FCAT Reading scale scores determined whether the new program was successful. In chapter 2, this researcher provides a more elaborate review of the literature to clarify these issues. The literature review focuses on the effect of leadership in designing remediation programs for students with exceptionalities. An overview of the design and impact that these innovative programs have on these students is discussed in chapter 2.

Synergy helps to form relationships that expand as well as realize the full potential of each school constituent (Clark, 2007). As school leaders move groups of

people who work toward separate goals into teams that work to attain common goals, synergy takes place. In time, the combined effect becomes greater than the sum of separate skills (Clark; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2004); 1 plus 1 equals much more than 2 (Clark). Hence, this learning in community or synergy increases school progress.

Constructivism forms the primary basis of learning (Lambert et al., 2002). As the lives of children and adults intertwine, relationships increase progress, and diversity provides depth, perspective, and equity to the relationships (Eaker et al., 2002; Lambert et al.). Thus, transformation attained through learning in community defines leadership that increases the rate and quality of school change. Constructivist and social justice beliefs focus on equitable solutions to identified problems and production of a socially just society that does not blame students for the circumstances that place them at risk (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Passionate leaders reconstruct schools by taking a moral position to demand socially just treatment. Change requires a critical, theoretical, and moral frame that reconstructs practice. The combined course is an example of this kind of change because the plans for the combined course stemmed from leaders applying constructivist beliefs.

This study of the effectiveness of the combined course offers an expanded perspective to guide reform movements and help teachers to teach more effectually. Educators seek ways to support students with mild to moderate exceptionalities that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. The combination of reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy, or progress,

provides a viable solution to this problem. Because students with mild to moderate exceptionalities form a major subgroup of the NCLB that comprises more than 10% of this central Florida high school population, exploring the impact of the combined course on FCAT scores was essential. Students with exceptionalities have a significant impact on school grades. Research has suggested that leaders should enact precise plans proven valid with these students (Armbruster et al., 2001). This researcher conducted the study to determine whether the combined program was successful.

Statement of the Problem

Just Read Florida (2003) mandated that high school students who have not passed the FCAT take remedial courses; however, no literature exists on combining remediation and support for these students. In addition to remedial courses, IEPs often require the support of a learning strategies course. District policies that restrict schedules to four blocks, including remedial and support classes, reduce the prospects for students to enroll in classes necessary for matriculation. At the time of this study, a new course that combined reading and learning strategies into one remediation and academic support block, leaving three blocks for required coursework and career-defining study, was in place. However, because just one teacher at this school is qualified to teach this course, a maximum of 30 students could enroll, but 96 other students required a separate learning strategies course, and 74 of these students also required reading remediation. This left more than 44 students to enroll in two or more remedial and support courses. The problem addressed in this study impacts exceptional students with mild to moderate disabilities: These students must take support and remedial courses instead of courses

required for graduation and electives designed to help them choose careers. As a result, these students fall behind their mainstream peers and are ill equipped to act in society as autonomous adults. Many possible factors, including constructivism, leadership, synergy, reading, standardized test research, and innovative program design, may contribute to the resolution of this problem. The literature review outlines the combined course and the steps required to ensure student success.

The intent of this study was to show that students labeled with mild to moderate disabilities may increase FCAT performance through enrollment in a combined model of remediation and support (independent variable) rather than in two separate classes for the same purpose. The participants in this study were assessed using their 2007 FCAT Reading scale scores as the pretest before enrollment and their 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores as the posttest after enrollment in the combined course. This study may contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by determining whether there was a significant difference between FCAT scores (dependent variable) before and after enrollment in the combined course.

This problem is original to the profession because it addressed inequities through forming paths to social change for students with exceptionalities. Growth and social justice may unfold by providing prospects, such as the combined course, that are more equitable and allow exceptional students to enroll in course options available to their mainstream peers. Because leaders enlighten mental power, shape affect, and cause societal change (Walden University, 2007), questions persist as to why remedial classes fail. This study served to determine whether the combined course also failed or if it

facilitated progress in accordance with Just Read Florida (2003). The application of research maintains the learning culture (Eaker et al., 2002), and transformational leaders protect the team values articulated as behaviors linked to a research-based vision.

This study focused on the problem students with exceptionalities face because of NCLB (2001) and Just Read Florida (2003) mandates designed to help these students become proficient before earning a standard high school diploma. The fact that the students involved in this study were previously unable to achieve the level of proficiency required caused them to face negative consequences of the reform movements. As educators, we must find ways to support students with exceptionalities that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. Combining reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy, or progress, provides a viable solution to this problem.

At this central Florida high school, leaders expand expertise using the *Getting Started* (Eaker et al., 2002) framework for professional learning communities. The first of three framework themes builds a solid foundation; the shared mission, values, and goals form the second; and the third defines school teams. Because a high percentage of students with exceptionalities had not attained the intended goals of passing the FCAT Reading examination, assessment must inform teaching (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 2000). One might ask, "Is there a relationship between enrollment in the combined course and increased FCAT Reading scale scores for these exceptional students?" This study focused on reading research to inform program design, including increasing motive and affect towards reading; reframing leadership to cause

synergy; and applying these findings to increase exceptional student progress in the combined course and on the FCAT.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether enrollment in the combined course improved the students' FCAT scores. This quasi-experimental repeated-measures quantitative study used a pretest-posttest design to compare the pre-, or 2007, FCAT Reading scale performances of 25 exceptional high school students diagnosed with mild to moderate disabilities enrolled in the combined course with the post-, or 2008, Reading scale scores of the same students. This study sought to determine whether there was a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores to test the theory that combining forms of remediation increases progress for students with exceptionalities. The independent variable was enrollment in the combined course. The dependent variable was the FCAT Reading scale scores. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants.

The participants' pre-, or 2007, FCAT scores and post-, or 2008, FCAT scores were retrieved from school records. These scores were analyzed using a related-samples *t* test. The FCAT has published strong reliability and validity ratings. A threat to validity existed in that there was only one program from which to select the participants. By combining remedial reading and learning strategies standards into one course, this researcher hoped that this differentiated model would meet, if not exceed, the remedial and support needs of these students to increase learning, as measured by increased FCAT scores. Increasing these scores will help these students to meet the requirements of the

NCLB (2001). This study intended to show that combining courses and enabling these students to enroll in more required courses may facilitate higher FCAT Reading scale scores.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Is there a significant difference between 2007 pretest and 2008 posttest FCAT Reading scale scores for students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course?

H_0: There is no significant difference between 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course.

H_1: There is a significant difference between 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course.

In chapter 3, this researcher explains the data, including student FCAT pretest, or 2007, and FCAT posttest, or 2008, scores. The dependent variable was the overall FCAT Reading scale score. Did enrollment in the combined course improve FCAT Reading scores? The independent variable was enrollment in the combined course. FCAT Reading scale pretest and posttest scores of all participants were retrieved from school records, and statistical analysis of these results was performed. Although standardized testing has been a long-term source of controversy in the field of education, federal, state, and local mandates attest to the validity of the FCAT. An explanation from the FLDOE (2007a) stated:

> FCAT was designed to assess student achievement of the Sunshine State Standards (SSS). The test meets all professional standards of psychometric quality traditionally associated with standardized achievement tests. Two constructs that are generally used to indicate the quality of a standardized test are reliability and validity . . . several measures of the technical quality of the FCAT show that scores from the FCAT are both reliable and valid. More detailed technical information than presented here is available from the Florida Department of Education upon request. (p. 37)

Hence, for the purpose of this study, the test served as a valid measure of student progress in accordance with NCLB (2001) and Just Read Florida (2003) mandates. The teacher who provided the combined course is exceptional student education certified and reading endorsed. She is highly qualified and trained in consistent delivery, and she is legally bound to individualize or differentiate instruction and follow accommodations in accordance with the IEPs of these students.

The null hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference between 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course. Rejection of the null hypothesis would confirm the alternative hypothesis and suggest that there is a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of students enrolled in the combined course. To test the hypothesis, this researcher analyzed the pretest and posttest scores (FLDOE, 2007a) using a repeated-measures *t* test.

Background and Theoretical Base of the Study

The combined learning strategies and remedial reading course was designed from the philosophies of differentiated instruction, synergy, and increased motivation. This differentiated model included the premise of combining course standards for learning

strategies and reading. Because this course was designed to bring each student to mastery of every task, each student was taught based on individual needs. Interest, present levels of performance in accordance with the IEP, and motivational theory to increase synergy were included to form relationships with students to cause increased response to remediation. Hirsch (2006) commented:

> National mandatory testing has highlighted the bankruptcy of prevailing ideas . . . the knowledge deficit is a profound failure of social justice . . . this failure is the consequence of good intentions in the service of inadequate ideas. (p. 6)

Proactive equitable leaders transform society, first at the classroom level and then in wider circles. Quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement do not exist, but an extensive base of skills required does (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). To encourage successful teacher leadership, administrators promote the use of research-based reading practices that emphasize motivation and technique (Lones, 2004). Teacher motive predicts student response because student gains mirror teacher mindset (Frijters, 2004). Hirsch (2006) stated that U.S. citizens should support the demands of the NCLB that require schools to show adequate yearly progress on standardized tests. This inducement to fairness and accountability tests progress and is the practical way to hold schools accountable for educating all children. However, Hirsch found a discrepancy between promoting reading progress and raising tests scores; many NCLB complaints pertain to the harmful influence of intensive test preparation. Therefore, this course did not use the FCAT to generate course outcome objectives or "teach to the test," but merely used it as a measure of success.

Most of the theorists have concurred with the NRP (2000) regarding effective reading instruction, but discrepancies have arisen between motive and increased reading performance. Carriveau (2006); Frijters (2004); Lones (2004); and Lynch in the roundtable discussion (as cited in Laureate Education, 2005) indicated that progress in the affective domain provides the key to progress in the cognitive domain. Although the NRP also suggested constructivist methods for effective teaching, most of the other literature focused on social justice and supported equitable learning through inspiring individuals and providing background knowledge. Carriveau as well as Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, and McKnight (2006) suggested that standardized test results have a negative impact because they do not provide enough information about students' abilities. Hirsch (2006) believed that there is a discrepancy between the purpose and the use of the tests that remains essential to accountability and social justice. Research-based remediation may address these discrepancies.

Intersecting issues of students with exceptionalities at this central Florida high school caused leaders to work in collaboration with a range of specialists to facilitate interventions that might result in increased achievement in standards-based education. Therefore, leaders play a vital role in furthering student progress. This process includes theory and attention to research trends, law, and the intended participants. Influential leaders cause societal change through teaching impelled by informed intellect and attitude (Walden University, 2007).

Teacher relationships with students increase synergy, which empowers each to absorb strategies (Clark, 2007; Frijters, 2004); therefore, the combined course required

educators to explore student affect as well as intellect to increase progress. Based on problem-setting theories (Schön, 1983), action research of a more efficient model to remediate and use increased FCAT success as the measure of progress formed the plans for study. Continued problem-setting practice not only solves the right problems but also increases expertise (Schön). Critical, social, and intellectual transformation achieved through purposeful learning in community defines leadership (Lambert et al., 2002). As teachers form relationships with students, synergy empowers progress (Clark; Frijters). Hence, this study required a skilled teacher to reach both student affect and intellect to increase synergy.

Research provides the key to solving problems (Schön, 1983). Powerful evidence of the transformational leadership style as well as winning vision is evident in successful programs. Because the questions that caused this problem-setting plan endured (Schön), this program included data-based curriculum choices.

Focus, self-control, self-esteem, interest, and motive remain lower in students with exceptionalities; these elements correlate to remediate response (Carriveau, 2006; Frijters, 2004). Educators must combine research data with their own observations to inform practice, increase literacy, and create a lens to see the successes and positive influences of these students on schools (Lynch, as cited in Laureate Education, 2005). The combined course should have increased motivation as enrollment opened elective options and gave students with exceptionalities the opportunity to address reading deficits with a dual-certified teacher. Observations at this central Florida high school indicated that FCAT failures may reflect disabilities as opposed to an inability to read. Because

school administrators set the tone for programs, leaders must uphold plans to instruct and study students with exceptionalities (Sonenblum, 2003; Thurlow et al., 2006). Increased progress results from relationships, and diversity provides depth, perspective, and equity (Eaker et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2002).

Leadership theory and reading research have shown that affect impacts performance. Extensive gaps exist in the relationship between motivation and test performance (NRP, 2000). Theories have focused on the impact of the affective domain, but little evidence supports a relationship. Teachers can realize potential through increasing motivation, thereby activating the affective domain.

An examination of the local data indicated that the exceptional student subgroup of this central Florida high school required program reform. Of the 324 exceptional students tested in the spring of 2007, 273 required remediation. Ninety-six students required a learning strategies course, and of those 96, 74 students required reading remediation. This researcher hypothesized that the impact of this study would include the growth of leadership skills in the students, the teachers, and the school leaders that may cause quantifiable gains for this significant NCLB subgroup. Standardized test scores were expected to rise, school performance to increase, and exceptional student matriculation to increase, causing dropout rates to fall.

Definitions of Terms

Combined learning strategies and reading course: The combined course used standards from both Reading and Learning Strategies (FLDOE, 2002) with an emphasis on each student's present levels of performance to increase skills, achieve IEP goals, and

meet the mandates of the NCLB (2001). The general daily format of the class included beginning with an individualized study and homework session; each student worked on mainstream assignments, which included applying reading strategies, with peer and teacher assistance. The goal of this portion of the class was to meet mainstream standards and complete assignments with support while using reading and learning strategies. The students discussed their mainstream progress and needs with other students as well as the teacher. The next 30 minutes of instruction was dedicated to exceptional student learning strategies to meet course standards as well as individual goals. This portion of the class also allowed the students to learn about special programs and their own special needs. The last 30 minutes of instruction focused more specifically on meeting reading standards on differentiated needs-based levels. This portion of the class incorporated research-based reading programs and methodologies. The teacher led this class by modeling and creating a flexible, supportive, individualized program, complete with synergy and acceptance of change.

Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test: The FCAT is part of Florida's response to the NCLB and forms the assessment for the overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards (FLDOE, 2007a). This assessment contains CRTs measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards in math, reading, writing, and science, and NRTs in reading comprehension and math problem solving to measure performance against national norms.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): "The term 'Individualized Education Program' or 'IEP' means a written statement for each child with a disability that is

developed, reviewed, and revised" (FLDOE, 1998, p. 1). The IEP is a written education plan developed individually by a team that includes educators, parents, and the child or the child with an identified disability. The plan includes specific levels of performance, placement, goals, objectives, and accommodations required for success in the least restrictive and most appropriate educational environment.

Learning strategies: The FLDOE (2002) defined learning strategies as

> The purpose of this course is to provide instruction that enables students with disabilities to acquire and use strategies and skills to enhance their independence as learners in educational and community settings. This content should include, but not be limited to the following: strategies for acquiring and storing knowledge, strategies for oral and written expression, strategies for problem solving, strategies for linking new information with prior knowledge, strategies for active participation in reading, viewing, and listening, self-regulated use of comprehension strategies, test-taking skills, time management and organization skills, social skills, [and] self-advocacy and planning skills. This course shall integrate the Sunshine State Standards and Goal 3 Student Performance Standards of the Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability as appropriate to the individual student and to the content and processes of the subject matter. . . *Students who are likely to pursue a standard high school diploma may take this course.* This course is designed primarily for students functioning at independent levels who are generally capable of living and working independently with occasional assistance (pp. 691-692)

Reading: The FLDOE defined reading as

> Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing competencies are integrated throughout students' learning experiences. Benchmarks for the Sunshine State Standards are repeated as needed in course sequences. As students progress from one course to the next, increases should occur in the complexity of materials and tasks and in the students' independence in the application of skills and strategies. Learning tasks and materials accommodate the individual needs of students. Technology is available for students to develop competencies in the language arts. . . The purpose of this course is to enable students to develop and strengthen reading skills through integrated experiences in the language arts strands. The content should include, but not be limited to, the following: reading as a complex process, cueing systems, content area vocabulary, reading for meaning through varied texts, reading strategies, reading fluency, integrated reading and writing processes, complex response to varied texts, critical-thinking and study skills,

> varied reading materials. . . This course shall integrate the Goal 3 Student Performance Standards of the Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability as appropriate to the content and processes of the subject matter (pp. 1-2)

Synergy: Synergy helps to form relationships that expand as well as realize the full potential (Clark, 2007) of each school constituent. As school leaders move groups of people who work toward separate goals into teams that work to attain common goals, synergy takes place. In time, the combined effect becomes greater than the sum of separate skills (Clark; Eaker et al., 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2004); 1 plus 1 equals much more than 2 (Clark). Hence, this learning in community, or synergy, increases school progress.

Assumptions

It was assumed that the teacher of the combined course implemented the standards and specially designed instruction for both the learning strategies and reading courses. This teacher incorporated these standards to include not only rigor and relevance but also to form synergistic relationships with the students. It also was assumed that the teacher applied appropriate standards, accommodations, and methods of instruction based on the IEP for each participant. Furthermore, it was assumed that the participants worked to their fullest potential.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that the participants had to be selected from one program for students in Grades 9 to 12 with exceptionalities because this was the only program with an exceptional student education certified and reading endorsed teacher at

this central Florida high school during the 2007-2008 school year. This selection excluded other possible participants for the study.

The limitations of the study also included the following possibilities. The teacher may not have implemented course standards and IEPs appropriately. These students may not have worked to their fullest potential in class or on the FCAT. The students may not have taken the 2008 FCAT, further limiting the number of participants for the study. There may have been students at this central Florida high school with undiagnosed exceptionalities, excluding them from study.

Scope

The breadth or scope of this study included all students who had been identified with a mild to moderate disability and were enrolled in the combined learning strategies and reading course at this central Florida high school during the 2007-2008 school year. All participants had previously taken and failed the Reading portion of the FCAT. This researcher compared the pretest or 2007 FCAT Reading scale scores with the posttest or 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores of 25 students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course.

Delimitations

The delimitations or boundaries of this study included only Grade 9 to Grade 12 students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course at this central Florida high school during the 2007-2008 school year. This study did not include students with exceptionalities not enrolled in special programs. It did not include students with severe disabilities. It did not include students who did not take the 2008 FCAT. This study only

included students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course at this central Florida high school during the 2007-2008 school year.

Significance of the Study

This researcher analyzed 2007 and 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores to determine whether there was a relationship between student enrollment in the combined course and test scores. The FCAT is Florida's standardized test (FLDOE, 2007a). Federal, state, and local mandates require that students achieve a passing score to avoid enrollment in remedial courses and to earn a standard high school diploma. Test scores are used to track student progress and to determine whether students are achieving adequate yearly progress.

Because no quantitative data existed at the time of this study demonstrating whether combined forms of remediation cause quantifiable gains for students with exceptionalities, the significance of this study was to prove or disprove the hypothesis that one rigorous course could lead to increased FCAT scores. If the FCAT scores increased significantly, other possible outcomes included more electives, increased matriculation, and higher graduation rates for students with exceptionalities at this central Florida high school. Intersecting issues of students with exceptionalities would cause leaders to work in collaboration with a range of specialists to facilitate interventions that would result in increased access to standards based education. Therefore, leaders play a vital role in furthering student progress. This process includes theory and attention to research trends, law, and the intended participants.

Summary

Chapter 2 presents the review of literature regarding reading and standardized test research; increased leadership; and synergy, affect, and motivation, which formed the theoretical basis for this study. In the first section of this literature review, research regarding reading and standardized test scores is examined. Next, constructivism, that is, increased leadership to increase synergy and ensure appropriate delivery of program design is discussed. Finally, the literature on synergy, affect, and motivation is reviewed.

Chapter 3 begins with an introduction of testing in Florida. The FCAT is reviewed, and regulations regarding assessment requirements are discussed. The purpose of the FCAT is described in this chapter. The researcher explains the potential population and sample as well as the components of the FCAT that were used. This researcher will describe the methodology for this study and the statistical procedures used to evaluate the obtained data. The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design is explained. The relevance of the study and its impact on the participants are discussed. The research question and hypothesis are restated. This researcher will discuss and support the significance of the study, reasons for the study, and the procedures used in the study. This discussion includes the instrument, as well as the validity and reliability of the instrument.

Chapter 4 provides the results of the study, including a detailed analysis of the findings, an interpretation of the results, and a summary. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion, summary, and recommendations, including an interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and further study. In

conclusion, this researcher explains how the combined course may have affected these students and may impact the future of exceptional students' education.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the changes to exceptional student education because of legislation impacting accountability and the effects of standardized test scores. The NCLB (2001) included students with exceptionalities in the complete picture of the school and required remediation for failure to meet proficiency. Students with exceptionalities in Florida had new barriers to graduation because of state and federal assessment mandates. Specifically, Just Read Florida (2003) mandated that high school students who had not passed the FCAT Reading exam had to take a remedial reading course. In addition, IEPs often required the support of a learning strategies course. District policies restricting schedules to four blocks, including remedial and support classes, reduced the prospects of these students to enroll in the necessary classes. This problem impacted students with exceptionalities who had to take remedial and support courses instead of classes required for graduation and career-defining electives. As a result, these students often fell behind scheduled graduation, ill equipped to act in society as autonomous adults. Leadership, reading and test research, and innovative program design all contributed to an efficient solution of this problem.

A rigorous new program that combined reading and learning strategies into one block was in place at one central Florida high school for the 2007-2008 school year, but this course had room for up to only 30 students. As remedial classes replaced required courses and career-defining electives, these students fell behind. Research surrounding reading and standardized tests; leadership; and synergy, affect, and motivation may help

to solve the problem. This study sought to determine whether a significant difference existed between the pretest and the posttest scores of students enrolled in the combined course. The purpose of this quasi-experimental quantitative study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was to compare the pretest, or 2007, FCAT Reading scale scores and the posttest, or 2008, FCAT Reading scale scores of 30 students enrolled in the combined course.

This study sought to test the theory that combining forms of remediation would increase student progress. This problem was original to the profession because it addressed inequities by forging paths to social change. There is a collective need for all public education stakeholders to take a proactive responsibility for improving student outcome (Keedy & McDonald, 2007). To strive for equitable solutions to identified problems and production of a socially just society, educators must find ways to support students with exceptionalities that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. The combination of reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy, hence progress, may provide a viable solution to this problem.

Was there a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course? To answer this question, this researcher stated the null hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the 2007 FCAT Reading pretest scores and the 2008 FCAT Reading posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course. This researcher also stated the alternative hypothesis: There is a significant difference between the 2007

FCAT Reading pretest scores and the 2008 FCAT Reading posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course. If the new combined course had results that were significant, the students would have had the benefit of a more efficient and successful remediation treatment. To test the hypothesis, this researcher analyzed pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores using a repeated-measures related-samples *t* test.

A review of literature regarding the FCAT; reading and standardized test research; increased leadership; and synergy, affect, and motivation formed the theoretical basis for this study about the impact of enrollment in the combined learning strategies and reading program on FCAT Reading scale scores. In the first section of this literature review, research regarding the FCAT is examined. Reading and standardized test scores are examined next. Then, leadership to increase synergy and ensure the appropriate delivery of program design is discussed. Finally, the literature on synergy, affect, and motivation is reviewed.

The basis of this study was the research cycle in response to the following inquiry and problem setting. Because students with exceptionalities had fallen behind graduation schedule when required to take both a remedial reading and a learning strategies course, the new combined class may alleviate the problem. The combined course should have increased progress through inquiry, reform, and synergy. Historical views have shown that leaders must commit to produce a just culture (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2004). Reading is an irreplaceable activity in developing productive, active adults and healthy communities, and it is essential for a prosperous, free society (National

Endowment for the Arts, 2007). Because inquiry addresses inequities and paths to social change, growth and social justice unfold through equal prospects for students (Marshall & Oliva) with exceptionalities. Because leaders enlighten mental power, shape affect, and cause societal change (Walden University, 2007), questions persist why classes to remediate have failed. Therefore, this researcher problem set this study to discover whether the new class impacted FCAT Reading results to help with data-driven decisions and intensify progress.

Standardized test data do not provide enough information to design services for students with exceptionalities because the results do not always indicate accurate student ability (Johnson et al., 2006). As expertise develops, students feel successful, and performance increases; therefore, to share active research extends expertise. Because school leadership revolves around quality student learning (Walden University, 2007), and research-based practices improve organizational performance (Fusarelli, 2008), the combined course evaluated in this study was designed with research-based programs. Fusarelli stated that innovative programs are encouraged by using data. This study served to determine whether this innovative program affected FCAT Reading results. Constructivist and social justice beliefs strive for equitable solutions to identified problems and the production of a socially just society that does not blame students for the circumstances that place them at risk (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Laureate Education, 2005). Furthermore, passionate leaders reconstruct schools taking a moral position to demand socially just treatment. Change requires a critical, theoretical, and moral frame that interrogates the assumptions that construct practices.

According to Taylor (2007), if a principal supports, monitors, and evaluates high-yield expectations, the school can experience gains fairly rapidly. There is no perfect intervention; the literacy needs of targeted students must drive design. Successful schools "schedule the reading intervention students with the same commitment as they do the Advanced Placement students" (Taylor, p. 3). Did this scheduling change yield FCAT progress? Taylor wrote, "Change happens in the classroom long before assessment results are provided. If there is no change in the classroom, then there will be no change in assessment data" (p. 5). Did the changes in the combined classroom produce positive results?

Researchers often overlook the insights of learners; they assume that standardized tests provide sufficient information because experts and lawmakers have argued the merits of these tests (Carriveau, 2006). Because adults rarely consider the perspective of the learner, this researcher realized that soliciting the views of the primary stakeholders within the course standards should increase synergy and shift the focus from increasing test scores alone to genuine learning that reflects excellence. Meltzner (2007) commented:

> Literacy is personal. The competence and confidence of those who feel able to read, write, listen, and speak. . . across settings positively affects their identity and sense of efficacy no matter what they choose to do for work or in life (p. 6)

According to Fayne and Weiss (2007),

> Individualized formal and informal assessments conducted with assistance from an intervention specialist for special needs adolescents is essential to growth. Remediation programs for students with special needs require educators to increase or the knowledge base of these students. In addition to increasing background knowledge, programs should increase vocabulary and comprehension by using graphic organizers, think alouds, and teaching other techniques and

> learning strategies to increase reading independence. Programs for adolescent students with exceptionalities should also capitalize on the social aspects of learning, which include peer-assisted learning and collaborative learning with differentiated learning and individualized accommodations and adaptations (pp. 21-23)

Reading instruction for students with exceptionalities requires attention to the IEP. Did the combined course designed specifically for students with exceptionalities prevail?

Because the NCLB (2001) required increased student test scores as the primary measure of progress, this course served to achieve this goal by increasing synergy, or progress. When understanding the students' perspective becomes a key practice, reform includes interpreting test failure as an experience required for growth and understanding (Kerdeman, 1998). Educators require opportunities to challenge assumptions and focus on the successes rather than the consequences (Laureate Education, 2005) of low FCAT scores. Combining research data with site-based observations helps educators to see students as positive influences on schools by informing and increasing practice to increase literacy.

Did combining forms of support and remediation into one synergistic course increase progress? Not enough research existed at the time of this study to make that determination. The literature reviewed for this study supported the efforts of today's leaders and program designers based on combined remediation. The purpose of combining support and reform was to more efficiently meet the needs of students with exceptionalities and the demands of the NCLB (2001) without causing these students to fall farther behind their nondisabled peers.

Historical Background

Historical perspectives provide leaders with keys to understanding theories influenced by their times as well as the dynamics between and among these theories (Lambert et al., 2002). Current leadership styles and perspectives may vary in emphasis, but all strive to achieve one common goal: increased student achievement. Administrators use theory to explain and predict school phenomena as well as to provide a framework for increased progress (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). As leaders apply theory, they create programs and suggest needed research. Research was required to determine whether there was a relationship between enrollment in the combined course and FCAT Reading scores.

In time, the research focus moved from efficacy to an emphasis on human elements, then to social systems and finally to school progress, democratic community, social justice, and postmodernism with coexistent traces of the past (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Social, political, and economic forces influence evolving theories and give rise to parallel themes or movements that attempt to define learning and leading in our schools (Lambert et al., 2002). Leaders must manage and account for learning, decision making, and technology, as well as consider vision, partnerships, and diversity (FLDOE, 2007c). Past perspectives and today's mandates have led practices to evolve towards promoting social justice and extending constructivist beliefs (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). Therefore, measurement of the effect of this course became essential to school evolution.

The FCAT is part of Florida's overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards (FLDOE, 2007a), This assessment, administered to students in Grades 3 through 11, contains two basic components, namely, CRTs measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards in math, reading, writing, and science, and NRTs to measure performance against national norms in reading comprehension and math problem solving. Florida's first administration of the FCAT was in 1998. However, the focus on educational accountability; student assessment; and school accountability systems, including the origin of Sunshine State Standards; and the development, administration, scoring and reporting of the FCAT began in 1991.

The 1991 School Improvement and Accountability legislation established the Florida Commission of Education Reform and Accountability and required significant changes in schools (FLDOE, 2007b). The purpose of this legislation was to ensure higher levels of achievement for all students, increase accountability, reward high-performing schools, and help unsuccessful ones. At the end of the 1990-1991 school year, 72 schools in 65 countywide districts were not making adequate progress.

In October of 1992, the High School Competency Test (HSCT) administration was moved from Grade 10 to Grade 11 (FLDOE, 2007a). The Grade 10 Assessment Test first administered in 1992 was a customized, norm-referenced, multiple-choice reading and math test. Grade 10 was added in 1994 in order to engage in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial State Assessments. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 expanded testing to include math and reading assessments of

students in Grades 4, 8, and 12. The State Board of Education adopted the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Design, established student achievement criteria, and identified critically low schools in 1995. There were 158 critically low schools, for a total of 7% reported. This identification led to the commitment to increase achievement for all schools and students.

Florida's curriculum framework, the Sunshine State Standards, was adopted in 1996 by the state board of education for seven subject areas (FLDOE, 2002). The performance standards were recognized for Florida students, and the FCAT was authorized at the same time the Grade 10 Assessment test was discontinued. In this year, 71 critically low schools were identified. In 1997, schools not meeting the criteria for the 3rd year were reported (FLDOE, 2007a). There were only 30 critically low schools this year. Criterion-referenced statewide assessments in reading, writing, and math for elementary, middle, and high school students were mandated in 1997. In February, FCAT reading and math were field tested in Grades 4, 5, 8, and 10. Each test included multiple choice and open-ended or performance tasks. The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) adopted a schedule for the national and state NAEP tests through 2010. The Individuals with Disabilities in Education [IDEA] Act of 1997 required inclusion of exceptional students in regular assessment programs. As a result, the State Board of Education included a variety of testing accommodations.

The FCAT was administered to students in Grade 4, 5, 8, and 10 in 1998 (FLDOE, 2007a). Achievement Levels 1 though 5 were set for FCAT scores. School results were reported, but they were not yet used for accountability purposes. Students

who scored over 327 in FCAT reading and 315 in FCAT math were exempt from the HSCT. Only 4 schools were recognized as not making adequate progress, as compared to 158 schools 3 years earlier. The Florida School Recognition program was funded. Also in 1998, the NAEP offered accommodations to students with disabilities and English language learners.

The A+ Plan for Education was enacted in 1999; standards and accountability were increased for students, schools, and educators (FLDOE, 2007a). Annual learning gains and tests were added to the accountability criteria for Grades 3 through 10. This included the use of FCAT as a graduation requirement and as a system for calculating individual students' academic growth each year. In 1999, school letter grades were based on five FCAT performance levels, and in this first year, 78 schools earned an F.

In 2000, all students in Grades 3 to 10 were assessed for the first time and FCAT Writes was established (FLDOE, 2007a). In addition, the first NRT for reading and math was administered in Grades 3-10. Although the NRT is not aligned with the Sunshine State Standards, it did ensure that Florida students were keeping pace with national peers. All 78 F schools improved their rating to a D or higher. Four schools earned Fs for the first time, and 1,015 schools earned financial incentives for achieving an A or improving by at least one letter.

In 1999, the state required passing FCAT scores to earn a standard high school diploma (FLDOE, 2007a). The NCLB (2001) required participation in the NAEP and annual reading and math testing for Grades 3 to 8; it added science testing starting in 2007-2008.

In 2002, state legislation required the retention of Grade 3 students who failed to earn more than a Level 1 score on the reading test (FLDOE, 2007a). Annual gains were available for the first time; developmental scale scores provided measures of student learning over 1 year. This score was added to the A+ Plan, causing 64 schools to earn Fs. The 2002 graduating class was the first required to earn passing FCAT scores. The legislature permitted some students the option of using SAT or ACT scores to earn a standard diploma. The first FCAT science scores were reported. The Enhanced New Needed Opportunity for Better Life and Education for Students with Disabilities (ENNOBLES) Act (2003) was passed. This act allowed the IEP team to determine whether the FCAT could accurately measure a student's ability and provided a waiver of the FCAT requirement for a standard diploma option graduation.

The writing proficiency requirement was raised from a 3.0 to a 3.5 for the 2004-2005 school year and to a 4.0 for the 2006-2007 school year. The FCAT science was added to the school grade for the 2006-2007 school year. In 2005, the FCAT science was moved from Grade 10 to Grade 11 to allow an additional year for students to receive high-level science instruction (FLDOE, 2007a). In 2006, FCAT Writes + scores were reported for the first time. Also in this year, science became the seventh component for calculating school grades, but it was not used to assess annual learning gains. Learning gains of the lowest quartile of students in math were added as the eighth component for school grades. The addition of these two components caused an adjustment to the school grading scale. Each letter grade required the school score 115 more points than before.

High schools could earn 10 bonus points if at least half of their Grades 11 and 12 passed the retake of the Grade 10 test to meet the graduation requirement.

The 2006 statutes required remediation for each student who earned less than a 3 on these tests. This additional requirement for remediation, along with mandates from individual student education plans, created impediments to progress toward graduation and inspired the development of the combined class and this study of the effectiveness of the combined class (FLDOE, 2007a). Increasing reform and remediation requirements caused a need for each exceptional student with a deficiency or a need for support to enroll in multiple remediation and support courses, none of which count toward graduation. The remainder of this literature review provides information regarding the need and design of an innovative response to this problem.

Reading and Standardized Test Research Informs Program Design

Hirsch (2006) stated that Americans should support the demands of the NCLB (2001) that require schools to show adequate yearly progress on standardized tests. He also stated that this praiseworthy essential inducement to fairness and accountability tests academic progress and is the only practical way to hold schools accountable for educating all children. Hirsch found a discrepancy between the promotion of reading progress and raising tests scores; many NCLB complaints pertain to the harmful influence of intensive test preparation. He argued that the test formats presented as measures of comprehension are actually measures of general reading ability, thus unfair.

Hirsch (2006) commented that students face a penalty when instruction focuses on process goals such as thinking skills, self-esteem, and cooperative learning at the

expense of content goals. He is a proponent of having a motivational base for standardized testing for students and teachers; he stated that what is monitored will be done. Hirsch suggested that standardized tests equalize educational opportunities, arguing that

> Tests are necessary to achieve excellence and fairness. They function as achievement incentives for students and teachers, as ways of monitoring students' progress in order to remedy their deficiencies, and as essential helps in the administrative monitoring of classrooms, schools, and districts. Without effective monitoring, neither good teaching or nor educational administration is possible. Finally, above all, objective tests are needed for academic fairness and social equity – the chief reasons that Americans to their credit, have been pioneers in developing objective tests. (p. 117)

Although Hirsch (2006) approved of objective testing, he bemoaned the failure of schools to develop the background knowledge necessary to truly educate students. He commented:

> National mandatory testing has highlighted the bankruptcy of prevailing ideas . . . the knowledge deficit is a profound failure of social justice . . . this failure is the consequence of good intentions in the service of inadequate ideas" (p. 6)

Will reducing the number of remedial courses and allowing exceptional students more time in academic and career defining electives expose these students to increased opportunities to increase background knowledge? As teachers persist in contributing active research, new reports will become pertinent to continued success. Proactive equitable leaders transform society, first on the classroom level, then in wider circles. "We should become experts in solving problems. . . then we will be able to learn anything . . . what these students and their teachers need is a revolution in ideas" (Hirsch, pp. 11-14).

According to Keedy and McDonald (2007), "NCLB assumes that pressure from accountability mechanisms will be sufficient to force improvement in student outcomes" (p. 136), but most experts disagree with this flawed assumption. Keedy and McDonald found that most schools in Kentucky had not undergone changes in culture, instruction, and structure and were ill equipped to develop the curriculum required to align assessment and instructional strategies. These researchers discovered that genuine collaboration by faculty over school-wide issues was required to increase achievement through collective synergy. Synergy among teachers as well as with students increases progress.

Quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement do not exist, but an extensive base of skills required does (NRP, 2000). These skills provide the basis for reading reform. Qualified, exceptional student education certified and reading endorsed teachers who were motivated to learn what works became essential; teachers must have the drive to succeed, inspire, and solicit student input. Hirsch (2006) stated:

> but so called low teacher quality is. . . the consequence of the training they have received. . . and the incoherent curricula they are given to teach. . . we will not improve teacher effectiveness until we change the unproductive romantic ideas that dominate teacher preparation and guarantee poor use of school time. . . schools with greater academic intensity produced not only learning, but also greater equity. . . if our idea of school includes, as it should, not just the building and the staff, but also the students who attend it. . . then there are relatively few local schools in any stable sense. (pp. 83, 84, 85, 86)

Hirsch also stated, "A much better way of finding out what knowledge speakers and writers take for granted is to ask these people themselves" (p.112), indicating that student input should be solicited.

Teacher preparation for the combined course included extensive training in differentiated reading instruction and accommodating students with exceptionalities to teach the reading and learning strategies curriculum in a cohesive and intense format. Building the staff and increasing synergy between and among educators as well as students served to remediate the instruction itself in this central Florida high school.

To encourage successful teacher leadership, administrators promote the use of research-based reading practices that emphasize general knowledge, motivation, and technique (Lones, 2004). Keedy and McDonald (2007) stated that officials should encourage all public education players to take proactive responsibility for improving student outcomes. Teacher motive predicts student response because student gains mirror teacher mindset (Frijters, 2004). For successful literacy improvement, teachers need to be motivated and engaged, and the same conditions that encourage struggling readers to put forth effort have to be paralleled for overall improvement (Meltzner, 2007). Environment, engagement, expectations, encouragement, and support are vital to literacy intervention. According to Keedy and McDonald, autonomy to decide how to educate children in districts and schools builds school-wide instructional capacity. Therefore, the combined course was designed to increase this school's instructional capacity.

The use of standardized tests often focus on raising test scores (Carriveau, 2006); the increased consideration of the students' perspective in the combined course should have increased synergy and shifted the focus from increasing test scores alone to genuine learning that reflects excellence. The common traits of successful schools (Lindgren, 2006) exist at this central Florida high school; consequently, the combined course

examined and increased motive for growth. To increase success, research has suggested that schools should study relationship, rigor, and relevance as well as innovative response to questions faced by schools (Armbruster et al., 2001; Frijters, 2004; Schön, 1983).

Focus, self-control, self-esteem, interest, and motive remain lower in students with exceptionalities; these elements correlate to remedial response (Carriveau, 2006; Frijters, 2004). Therefore, exploring student response formed a crucial step in the problem-solving plan for the course. Carriveau argued:

> Standardized tests do impact the curriculum with which students engage in schools, as well as create potentially traumatic experiences for children taking the tests. Ironically, while calling for higher standards and accountability, NCLB may be having the reverse effect. Regardless, NCLB and its standardized testing component have become part of the culture of American schools. (p. 26)

Regardless of the opponents of standardized testing, the central Florida school for this study had to follow mandates requiring FCAT progress and passing the test or meeting remediation standards to fulfill graduation requirements.

> The FCAT is part of Florida's overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards. The FCAT, administered to students in Grades 3-11, contains two basic components: criterion-referenced tests (CRT), measuring selected benchmarks in Mathematics, Reading, Science, and Writing from the Sunshine State Standards (SSS); and norm-referenced tests (NRT) in Reading and Mathematics, measuring individual student performance against national norms. (FLDOE, 2007a, p. 13)

Therefore, this study used the FCAT Reading scale scores to validate progress. The FLDOE also stated:

> The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is part of Florida's overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards. The FCAT, an assessment test administered to students . . . contains two basic components: criterion referenced tests (CRT) measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards (SSS or Standards) . . . and norm-referenced tests (NRT) . . . measuring individual student performance against national norms. . . .

> The FCAT is given to measure achievement of the Standards. . . . the benchmarks outlined in the Standards are also embedded in the material of a student's core classes. . . . In the early 1970's, the statewide assessment of students . . . was authorized. In 1976, the Florida legislature approved assessments. . . including the nation's first high school graduation test. Since then, the Legislature has continuously supported assessment and evaluation activities in the state's public school system. The purpose and design of the statewide assessment program is articulated in s. 1008.22, F.S., and the public school progression plan is in s. 1008.25, F.S. . . . The A+ school accountability program is designed to encourage students and teachers to attain higher standards by offering financial incentives to Florida schools. . . . sometimes student learning does not improve even though more money has been spent on education. . . . this is why the federal government has enacted the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Students, teachers, and school administrators can improve their performance if they have clear understanding that their first obligation is academic achievement at high levels. (pp. 13, 20)

Although most theorists have concurred with the NRP (2000) on effective reading instruction, discrepancies have arisen between motive and increased reading performance. Carriveau (2006); Frijters (2004); Lones (2004); and Lynch (as cited in Laureate Education, 2005) suggested that progress in the affective domain provides the key to progress in the cognitive domain. Although the NRP also has suggested constructivist methods for effective teaching, most of the other literature, including Hirsch's (2006) theories, has focused on social justice and has supported equitable learning through inspiring individuals, providing background knowledge, and investigating affective roots of reading deficiencies.

Carriveau (2006) and Johnson et al. (2006) suggested that standardized test results have a negative impact, but they did not provide enough information. Hirsch (2006) believed that there is a discrepancy between the purpose and the use of the tests that remain essential to accountability and social justice. Synergistic research-based

remediation may address these discrepancies. The combined course was designed to include the students not only in learning but also in informing design.

Standardized tests provided the best measure of progress for this combined course in accordance with state and local mandates. The combined course required support, including the formation of synergistic relationships to increase motivation to read and performance. The combined course also focused on learning and reading strategies as well as background knowledge to increase and prepare these students for academic and FCAT success.

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), "The shameful fact that nearly one-third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to declining literacy and reading comprehension" (p. 3). It reported that lower levels of reading and writing ability correlate to poor performance in the job market, lack of employment, lower wages, and poor opportunities for advancement. It also stated that lower reading skills are commonly found among prisoners and that deficient readers rarely become active in civic duties such as voting or cultural life, including volunteerism. Poor readers experience lower levels of financial and job success. Because reading correlates with positive behavior, reading is an essential activity for developing productive adults and healthy communities. "It is no longer reasonable to debate whether the problem exists. It is now time to become more committed to solving it" (National Endowment for the Arts, p. 4).

According to the Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLaRE, 2007), a major emphasis in education today is ensuring that diverse learners become successful

readers. Providing appropriate reading instruction for the rising number of students with learning disabilities has led to the need for educators to develop an understanding of learning specific to these students. IDEA defined a specific learning disability as a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding and using language. According to FLaRE, 80% of students identified with a specific learning disability have been identified because they are not proficient readers.

According to the NRP (2000), effective reading instruction for students with reading disabilities must include a combination of explicit and direct reading instruction. Foorman and Torgesen (2001) stated that instruction for students with these difficulties must be more explicit, comprehensive, intensive, and supportive than the instruction required by other children because children with disabilities learn more rapidly in small groups or one-on-one formats than in typical classroom settings. Foorman and Torgesen also stated that the more recent call for evidence-based research shows that no single method works for all teachers, or all children, but the key to designing reading instruction for students with reading disabilities is focusing on the strengths and needs of the individual students. They commented that "children whose lack of preparation for learning to read is the result of genetic factors" (p. 207) will require different interventions. The delivery of instruction for these students must be more explicit, intense, and supportive for goals to be achieved.

According to Foorman and Torgesen (2001), increasing reading instructional time in the mainstream classroom will help many, but a more practical method is to provide small-group instruction because children with reading disabilities learn faster with greater

instructional intensity than in “typical classrooms” (p. 209). Some methods of increasing academic intensity for these students are to increase the amount of academic engaged time, use peer=assisted learning strategies, and be more supportive emotionally and cognitively. Foorman and Torgesen concluded that this small percentage of students requires more explicit, comprehensive, and supportive instruction than is typically provided by schools. These factors were infused into the design of the combined course.

Increased Leadership Creates Synergy

In an effort to fulfill the obligation and increase academic achievement at high levels, leaders must help form relationships with teachers and students. “Authentic team processes experienced within and exhibited by a group are called synergy” (Mullen & Lick, 1999). Synergy refers to the whole as more than the sum of its parts. People work together in synergistic relationships to generate a total result greater than the outcome of their separate efforts. The openness and diversity of individual perspectives help to create new ideas, knowledge, and problem-solving potential (Mullen & Lick).

Synergy helps to form relationships that expand as well as realize the full potential of each school constituent. As school leaders move groups of people that work toward separate goals into teams that work to attain common goals, synergy takes place (Clark, 2007). In time, the combined effect becomes greater than the sum of separate skills (Clark; Eaker et al., 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Sergiovanni, 2004); 1 plus 1 equals much more than 2 (Clark; Mullen & Lick, 1999). With synergy, the basis for real change is formed through the commitment to meaningful classroom and school

transformation (Mullen &Lick). Hence, this learning in community or synergy increases school progress.

Relationships with students increase synergy, which empowers each to absorb learning strategies (Clark, 2007; Frijters, 2004); therefore, this course required educators to explore student affect as well as intellect to increase progress. According to Phillips (2007), although it is essential, it is an unusual secondary teacher who wants to teach students how to learn. Teachers need professional development to gain a working knowledge of strategies that best support students as they interact with text. Phillips contended that successfully embedding literacy into daily instruction is a critical ingredient of a successful literacy program; change begins with vision, initiative, and active involvement.

Problem-setting theories (Schön, 1983) have suggested action research of a more efficient model. Therefore, if the FCAT scores of students enrolled in the new combined course increased, the efficiency of the new model was confirmed. Because research resolves problems, continued problem-setting practice not only solves the right problems but also adjusts the blueprint to increase expertise (Schön). Because critical, social, and intellectual transformation achieved through purposeful learning in community defines leadership (Lambert et al., 2002) as teachers form relationships with students, the resulting synergy empowers progress (Clark, 2007; Frijters, 2004). As expertise develops, leaders look to research for the keys to solving problems (Schön). Powerful evidence of the transformational leadership style as well as a winning vision is evident in successful programs; will the combined course be included? As the questions that caused this

problem-setting plan endured, educators applied data-based curriculum choices to cultivate the shared mission (Eaker et al., 2002). Analysis directs the response to questions and maintains the learning culture, which then drives school success. Therefore, this course required skilled teachers to reach both student affect and intellect to increase synergy. The impact of the combined course on FCAT Reading scale scores determined the success of the course.

To increase opportunities to challenge assumptions, educators need to combine research data with personal observations as well as student input to inform practice, increase literacy, and create a lens to see the successes and positive influences of these students on schools (Lynch, as cited in Laureate Education, 2005). School observations have shown many valid reasons for FCAT failure. Student background, ability, and disability matter, yet FCAT scores do not account for these issues. Students with specific learning disabilities often work at the appropriate pace for their ability making reading gains through innovative programs. This combined course may enlighten testing choices for these students. School-based observations indicated that FCAT failures may reflect disabilities, not an inability to read. Stressors such as test anxiety, class work, and emotional issues impact student classroom performance. Did the students in the combined course overcome these issues, thus enabling them to perform to their ability on the FCAT? These findings led this researcher to reflect on the inquiry stance and shift the shared leadership model, causing communal responsibility for exceptional students at this central Florida high school. Synergy strengthens “team-building, sponsorship, advocacy, support, and commitment to significant change in school culture, leading to enhanced

student learning and school improvement (Mullen &Lick, 1999). Just as school administrators set the tone for programs, leaders must uphold plans to instruct and study students with exceptionalities (Sonenblum, 2003; Thurlow et al., 2006). Research has provided the validity and trends to problem solve (Walden University, 2007), but leaders must solve the right problems to cultivate the culture of learning. When problem setting becomes a principle of action, problems resolve as shared research increases progress (Schön, 1983). Therefore, sharing the results of this study could lead to the development of successful programs elsewhere.

Constructivism forms the primary basis of learning (Lambert et al., 2002). Increased progress results from relationships; diversity provides depth, perspective, and equity (Eaker et al., 2002; Lambert et al.). Transformation attained through learning in community defines leadership that increases the rate and quality of change at this central Florida high school.

When understanding students' perspective becomes a key practice, new concepts and relations could follow; thus, the combined course included prior test failure interpreted according to Kerdeman (1998) as an experience required for growth and understanding. Learner-driven data provided combined course teachers with the perspective of their most important constituents; their students (Carriveau, 2006; Lynch, as cited in Laureate Education, 2005). Theory and research maximized constituent potential to provide students with the bona fide learning warranted; consequently, leaders incorporated this new program design.

Research has suggested that leadership styles vary, depending upon the leaders' interpretations and applications of evolved theories to address the needs of their organizations. At the same time, they must meet political, social, and constituent needs as well as state and national standards (Lambert et al., 2002; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004; Eaker et al., 2002). However, leaders must emphasize these theories as well as traces of past theories to balance requirements and constituent needs to cause social changes that also increase student achievement and school performance (Lunenburg & Ornstein; Sergiovanni, 2004). The leaders at this central Florida high school concluded that synergistic, research-based remediation taught in combination with learning strategies should transform exceptional student education.

When expertise and relationships with synergy develop, the combined course teachers could realize the full potential of each member. Although much of the literature has discussed affect, motive, and relationships as areas requiring further research, Carriveau (2006) and Kerdeman (1998) stated that there is a specific need to include qualitative student responses to cause social change. Leadership theory and reading research have shown that affect impacts performance. Extensive gaps exist in the relationship between motivation and test performance. The NRP (2000) identified the need for motivation research. Theories have focused on the impact of the affective domain, but little research has shown the direct correlation. Carriveau's study showed that surveying students provides answers to anomalies in quantitative data; was there a need to explain anomalies in this study? Combined course teachers can realize student

potential by increasing synergy and motivation, thereby activating the affective domain. Was this realization evident in the FCAT Reading scores?

Current Method of Remediation

The FCAT is part of Florida's response to the NCLB (2001). This assessment, administered to students in Grades 3 through 11, contains CRTs measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards in math, reading, writing, and science, as well as NRTs in reading comprehension and math problem solving to measure performance against national norms (FLDOE, 2007a). The current method of remediation for students with exceptionalities who have not passed the FCAT reading often includes enrollment in both a learning strategies course and an intensive reading course. This placement leaves only two blocks for academic instruction and no time for enrollment in career defining electives or courses of interest.

The IEP is a written statement that drives instruction for each child with a disability (FLDOE, 1998). Because of serious reading difficulties, when students with exceptionalities struggle to pass the FCAT, they also tend to struggle in their academic classes. As a result, most students with exceptionalities and deficiencies are enrolled in a learning strategies class for academic, emotional, and behavioral support. "The purpose of this research, critical thinking, and study skills course is to enable exceptional students to develop learning strategies, critical-thinking skills, and problem-solving skills to enhance their performance in academic and nonacademic endeavors" (FLDOE, 2002, p. 691). The content includes learning strategies for acquiring, storing, and retrieving information, oral and written communication, time management and organizational skills,

and for critical-thinking operations. Course standards also are designed to increase processes; enabling skills; problem-solving skills; and strategies, including test-taking skills and strategies for linking new information with prior knowledge. This course integrates the Student Performance Standards of the Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability as appropriate to the content and processes of the subject matter that students must learn.

Florida mandates require intensive reading instruction for students who fail to pass the FCAT (FLDOE, 2007a). Learning tasks and materials for intensive reading instruction should accommodate the individual needs of students because the purpose of this course is to enable students to develop and strengthen reading skills through integrated language arts experiences (FLDOE, 2002). The content should include "reading as a complex process, cueing systems, content area vocabulary, reading for meaning through varied texts, reading strategies, reading fluency, integrated reading and writing processes, complex response to varied texts, critical-thinking and study skills, varied reading materials" (FLDOE, 2002, p.692). Leaders at this central Florida high school devised a problem-setting plan to find a more efficient way to remediate these students that would not exclude them from enrollment in elective courses of choice and other academic courses because "reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing competencies are integrated throughout students' learning experiences" (FLDOE, 2002, p. 692).

Structure of the Combined Course

The combined course used a strong empirical basis and standards from both reading and learning strategies with an emphasis on each student's present levels of performance to increase skills, achieve IEP goals, and meet the mandates of the IDEA (1997) and the NCLB (2001). Gersten and Dimino (2006) described the need for this empirically based change:

> The field of special education seems to lurch forward in a seemingly never-ending series of reforms and initiatives. . . Rarely is there a strong empirical basis for the proposed reform. . . the speed of these reforms. . . seems extraordinary. More recently, every shift or change in special-education policy or procedure has had dramatic repercussions for the field of reading instruction. . . These reforms invariably have a profound effect on students with reading difficulties, because the largest groups of special-education students are those with LD, and the vast majority of these students demonstrate serious difficulties in reading. (pp. 1-2)

According to FLaRE (2007), because of the link among motivation, reading behavior, and performance, any discussion of improving ability must emphasize improving motivation and engagement in reading. "It would be easy to improve students' motivation to read if motivation were a mere matter of "wanting" to do something. . . Motivation involves needs and goals, but also values beliefs, and past experiences" (FLaRE, p. 1). To be motivated, students need to see the value of instruction and believe that they will be successful. Therefore, the general daily format of the class was designed with student input and included beginning with an individualized study or reading across the curriculum and homework sessions where each student worked on mainstream assignments with peer and teacher assistance. The goal of this portion of the class was to meet mainstream standards and complete assignments with support while integrating more intensive and explicit reading and learning strategies as suggested by FLaRE, the

Foorman and Torgesen (2000), and the NRP (2000). This portion of the class allowed time for individual students to meet and discuss their mainstream progress and needs in small and one-on-one groups with other students as well as the teacher. Students saw the value as their immediate goals and mainstream progress became more attainable each day.

The next 30 minutes of instruction were dedicated toward learning strategies for students with exceptionalities and meeting the course standards as well as IEP goals. This portion of the class also allowed students to learn about special programs and their own special needs. Students with exceptionalities require critical effective instruction that is more explicit, comprehensive, intensive, and supportive than required by the majority of children (Foorman & Torgesen, 2000). The last 30 minutes of instruction were geared specifically toward reading standards and meeting these standards on students' differentiated needs-based levels. This portion of the class incorporated research-based reading programs and methodologies. The teacher led this class by modeling and creating a flexible, supportive, individualized program complete with synergy and acceptance of change.

According to the FLaRE (2006b), adolescents are not learning the knowledge and skills needed to function in today's economy. As a result, federal and state governments have introduced policies and programs to help promote literacy development. Adolescent literacy "embodies the complex interdependence of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking in adolescents' construction of knowledge about academic disciplines, and the world in general" (FLaRE, p. 1). FLaRE also contended:

> Adolescents deserve quality education that will best prepare them for the 21st century and for productively managing a meaningful life in a democracy. . . the future of our nation depends on a succession of a well prepared citizenry and workforce. (p. 2)

To promote adolescent literacy, FLaRE recommended that educators use data to identify student need, provide resources to ensure teacher preparation and continuous professional development, provide effective literacy based instruction, develop literacy plans including support strategies for all content areas, and ensure strong implementation of comprehensive quality literacy programs.

The combined learning strategies and intensive reading course was designed to address the matriculation and lack of motivating electives problem by meeting the support and remedial reading needs of these students with exceptionalities in one synergistic block. By combining remedial reading and learning strategies standards into one course, this researcher hoped that this differentiated model would meet, if not exceed, the remedial and support needs of these students to increase learning, as measured by increased FCAT scores. Increasing these scores would help these students to meet the requirements of the NCLB (2001). This study intended to show that combining courses, thus enabling these students to enroll in more required courses, would also facilitate higher FCAT scores.

The combined course was designed from the philosophies of differentiated instruction, synergy, and increased motivation. This differentiated model included the premise of combining course standards for learning strategies and reading. Each student was taught based on individual needs because this course was designed to bring each student to mastery of every task. Interest, present levels of performance in accordance

with the IEP, and motivational theory to increase synergy were included to form relationships with students to cause increased response to remediation.

To encourage successful teacher leadership, administrators promote the use of research-based reading practices that emphasize motivation and technique (Lones, 2004). Teacher motive predicts student response because student gains mirror teacher mind set (Frijters, 2006). According to Keedy and McDonald (2007), the teacher-student relationship tends to mirror the principal-teacher relationship. FLaRE (2007) asserted that recent pressures on teachers to prepare students for standardized tests and document their efforts has shifted teacher attention away from developing lifelong readers. FLaRE noted that improving motivation or engagement in reading remains essential, noting that "motivation involves needs and goals, but also values, beliefs, and past experiences" (p. 1).

Hirsch (2006) stated that U.S. citizens should support the demands of the NCLB (2001) that require schools to show adequate yearly progress on standardized tests. This inducement to fairness and accountability tests progress and is the practical way to hold schools accountable for educating all children. However, Hirsch found a discrepancy between the promotion of reading progress and raising tests scores; many NCLB complaints pertain to the harmful influence of intensive test preparation. Therefore, this course did not teach to the test, but merely used it as a measure of success.

Teachers' relationships with students increase synergy, which empowers each to absorb strategies (Clark, 2007; Frijters, 2004; Mullen & Lick, 1999); therefore, the combined course required educators to explore student affect as well as intellect to

increase progress. Based on problem-setting theories (Schön, 1983), action research of a more efficient model to remediate and use increased FCAT success as the measure of progress formed the plans for study. Continued problem-setting practice not only solves the right problems but also increases expertise (Schön). Critical, social, and intellectual transformation achieved through purposeful learning in community defines leadership (Lambert et al., 2002). As teachers form relationships with students, synergy empowers progress (Clark; Frijters; Lick). Hence, this study required skilled teachers to reach both student affect and intellect to increase synergy.

Research provides the key to solving problems (Schön, 1983). Powerful evidence of the transformational leadership style as well as winning vision is evident in successful programs; is the combined course included? As the questions that caused this problem-setting plan endured (Schön), this program included data-based curriculum choices. Did research-based reading remediation, taught in combination with synergistic learning strategies designed to increase motivation to read, address this exceptional student need transforming the high school?

Focus, self-control, self-esteem, interest, and motive remain lower in exceptional students, and these elements correlate to remediate response (Carriveau, 2006; Frijters, 2004). Educators must combine research data with their own observations to inform practice, increase literacy, and create a lens to see the successes and positive influences of these students on schools (Lynch, as cited in Laureate Education, 2005). The goal of the combined course was designed to increase motivation as enrollment opened elective options and allowed exceptional students the opportunity to address reading deficits with

a dual-certified teacher. Observations indicated that FCAT Reading failures may reflect disabilities, not an inability to read; does this study show that addressing both issues in one combined course increased test success? Just as school administrators set the tone for programs (Keedy & McDonald, 2007), leaders must uphold plans to instruct and study students with exceptionalities (Sonenblum, 2003; Thurlow et al., 2006). Increased progress results from relationships; diversity provides depth, perspective, and equity (Eaker et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2002).

Significance of the Methodology

Reading failure is defined by performance in the lowest quartile on a standardized reading test (King & Torgesen, 2000) such as the FCAT. According to the FLDOE (2007b), how well students have learned the content of assessed standards and how results could be improved is determined by producing FCAT results and identifying trends to identify instructional implications. FCAT data may be used to identify and implement curriculum and instructional modifications for classrooms and schools in Florida. "Risk for reading failure always involves the interaction of a particular set of child characteristics with specific characteristics of the instructional environment" (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001, p. 206). Therefore, the FCAT Reading scale scores determined the effectiveness of the combined course and provided the data required to confirm or reject the null hypothesis for this study.

Research-based practices improve organizational performance, but "when the research is relevant to practitioners' needs and when school leaders foster a culture of data literacy, the picture changes" (Fusarelli, 2008, p. 365). According to Fusarelli,

evidence has suggested that school leaders across the nation who are incorporating data-driven practices to decide what is working, and what is not, produce substantial improvements in student learning. Fusarelli stated that using data in decision making encourages innovation. The need to research the impact of the combined course on the academic performance of students with exceptionalities was required for the improvement of the school structure. An additional benefit of the innovative combined course was preventing this population from falling farther behind their mainstream peers. Investigating the effectiveness of this innovative response was necessary to improve the success of this school's remediation and support of students with exceptionalities.

Until now, the majority of research has focused on qualitative descriptions of philosophy and arguments regarding standardized testing. Because the FCAT is here to stay, and because these students must increase their proficiency, it was time for a quantitative study demonstrating the efficiency of the combined course for remediation and support. Now that this group of students with exceptionalities was educated in a new model designed to increase levels of support and reading remediation simultaneously, what impact did this course have on FCAT Reading scores?

IDEA, the NCLB, and Just Read Florida mandates no longer allow for the interpretation of qualitative factors, but require schools to produce quantitative data to provide a school grade and the rewards or repercussions of said grade. In the combined course, instruction was individualized or differentiated to produce increased test results in accordance with the NCLB. According to Fusarelli (2008), the common perception is that educational leaders ignore research when they make decisions, except when the research

is relevant and leaders foster a culture of data literacy. There have been limited quantitative studies providing data on the effects of specific and innovative reform for students with exceptionalities (Hamilton, 2001; Hayward, Das, & Janzen, 2007). Because this population has a strong impact on school grades, quantitative studies exist on the effects of reading remediation on student achievement, and studies on the correlation between exceptional student achievement and remediation exist, but limited data exist regarding innovative methods specifically designed for these students. No research has been published on the use of combined courses for these students.

Critical Analysis

Historical perspectives provide leaders with keys to understand theories influenced by their times as well as the dynamics between and among these theories (Lambert et al., 2002). Current leadership styles and perspectives may vary in emphasis, but all strive to achieve one common goal: increased student achievement. Administrators use theory to explain and predict school phenomena as well as provide a framework for increased progress (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). As leaders apply theory, they create programs and suggest required research. In time, the research focus moved from efficacy to an emphasis on human elements, then to social systems and finally to school progress, democratic community, social justice, and postmodernism with coexistent traces of the past (Lunenburg & Ornstein). Social, political, and economic forces influence evolving theories and give rise to parallel themes or movements that attempt to define learning and leading in our schools (Lambert et al.). Leaders must manage and account for learning, decision making, and technology, as well as consider vision, partnerships, and diversity

(FLDOE, 2007c). Past perspectives and today's mandates have led practices to evolve toward promoting social justice and extending constructivist beliefs.

Increased Leadership Creates Synergy

Research has suggested that leadership styles vary, depending upon the leaders' interpretations and applications of the evolved theories to address the needs of their organizations. At the same time, they must meet political, social, and constituent needs as well as state and national standards (Lambert et al., 2002; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004; Eaker et al., 2006). However, leaders must emphasize these theories as well as traces of past theories to balance requirements and constituent needs to cause social changes that also increase student achievement and school performance (Lunenburg & Ornstein; Sergiovanni, 2004). Therefore, synergistic, research-based remediation taught in combination with learning strategies should address the needs of students with exceptionalities transforming this central Florida high school.

Standardized Tests and Reading Research Inform Program Design

Most theorists have concurred with the NRP (2000) regarding effective reading instruction, but discrepancies have arisen between motive and increased reading performance. Carriveau (2006); Frijters (2004); Lones (2004); and Lynch (as cited in Laureate, Education, 2005) have indicated that progress in the affective domain provides the key to progress in the cognitive domain. Although the NRP also has suggested constructivist methods for effective teaching, most of the other literature, including Hirsch's (2006) theories, has focused on social justice and has supported equitable learning through inspiring individuals, providing background knowledge, and

investigating affective roots of reading deficiencies. Both Carriveau and Johnson et al. (2006) suggested that standardized test results have a negative impact without providing enough information regarding student ability or how to best educate these students. Hirsch believed that there is a discrepancy between the purpose and the use of the tests that remains essential to accountability and social justice. Synergistic, research-based remediation informed by learners may address these discrepancies. Synergy includes the students not only in learning but also in informing class design.

Affect and Motivation

When expertise and relationships with synergy develop, the full potential of each member can be realized. Although much of the literature has discussed affect, motive, and relationships as areas requiring further research, Carriveau (2006) and Kerdeman (1998) stated the specific need to include qualitative student responses to cause social change. Leadership theory and reading research has shown that affect impacts performance. Extensive gaps exist in the relationship between motivation and test performance. The NRP (2000) showed the need for motivation research. Theories have focused on the impact of the affective domain, but little research has shown evidence. Carriveau's study showed that surveying students provided answers to anomalies in quantitative data. Can student potential be realized by increasing motivation, thereby activating the affective domain?

When leaders commit to improve the professional learning community caliber, student progress increases (Eaker et al., 2002). Applying research begins the study; shared results completed the research cycle and provided the basis for further study at this

school, in the district, and in neighboring districts. Successful inquiry may lead to congruent programs for other NCLB (2001) subgroups. Once programs that work become evident, the questions of further study to produce increased learning gains arise. Data have suggested a focus on the FCAT reading failure group; further inquiry showed the need to narrow the focal point to the students in the combined course. This study served to address questions of more efficient program design based on student input to cause increased progress (Johnson et al., 2006) and validate the combined course. The combined course included research-based, essential strategies taught by a highly qualified, motivated professional. This teacher strived to increase synergy to provide a more efficient program for students with exceptionalities. Leaders facilitated communication and supported the community through the changes in approach. The framework for the program balanced concerns through the selection of standards, methods, materials, teachers, and then expanded to include synergistic teaching to increase progress.

This study served to offer a new perspective to educators and researchers to help guide reform movements. In addition, the results may help legislators shape more productive assessment policies with educational options for students with exceptionalities. Educators must find ways to support exceptional students that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. The combination of reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy, or progress, provided a viable solution to this problem. Studying student-driven research to modify this course should increase the quality of reform and instruction. This topic became essential because

students with exceptionalities formed a major subgroup of the NCLB (2001) that included more than 10% of the school population. Students with exceptionalities have a significant impact upon school grades comprised of state and federal ratings.

Research has suggested that the school should enact precise plans proven valid with these students (Armbruster et al., 2001). Assessments, plans, surveys, and programs play crucial roles in the success of the students; research informed this selection. Expert teachers, impelled to learn and apply what works became essential because combining courses required expertise. Motive stems from shared goals (Eaker et al., 2006; Frijters, 2004; Lambert et al., 2002); students and teachers prevailed if the program caused increased progress and opportunities for students with exceptionalities to define career interests and remediate deficiencies. Theory and research formed the questions for this study. Did committed teachers with brilliant style and the skill required to form synergistic relationships that impel students (Frijters; Lindgren, 2006; Lones, 2004) prevail?

Conclusion

This literature review was written to stress the importance of meeting student need through innovative models to increase genuine learning and consequently FCAT scores. When leaders commit to improve the professional learning community caliber, student progress increases (Eaker et al., 2002; Mullen &Lick, 1999). Applying research formed the course; shared results completed the research cycle and provided the basis for further study at this central Florida high school. Successful inquiry may lead to congruent programs for other NCLB (2001) subgroups. Once successful programs become evident,

the questions of further study to produce increased learning gains arise. Data suggested a focus on the exceptional student populous of this central Florida high school who make up 24% of the FCAT reading failure group; further inquiry showed the need to narrow the focal point to the students in the combined course. This study served to validate the combined course to determine whether it was an efficient program design based on synergy to cause increased progress (Clark, 2007; Johnson et al., 2006; Mullen &Lick). The combined course included research-based, essential strategies taught by a highly qualified, motivated professional. This teacher strived to increase synergy to provide a more efficient program specifically for students with exceptionalities. Leaders facilitated communication and supported the community through the changes in approach. The framework for the program balanced concerns through the selection of standards, methods, materials, teachers, and expanded to include synergistic teaching and review of student input to influence affect and motivation to increase progress.

This study offered a new prescription to educators and researchers to help guide reform movements. In addition, the results may help legislators shape more productive course policies with options for students with exceptionalities. Educators seek ways to support students with exceptionalities that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood (FLaRE, 2007). The combination of reading and learning strategies standards into a single course designed for the specific needs of students with exceptionalities to cause synergy, or progress, provided a viable solution to this problem. Essential results provided evidence that may increase the quality of reform and instruction because students with exceptionalities form a major subgroup of the NCLB

(2001) that comprises 20% of the nationwide school population. These students with exceptionalities have a significant impact upon school grades comprised of state and federal ratings.

Research has suggested that leaders should enact precise plans proven valid with students with exceptionalities (Armbruster et al., 2001; NRP, 2000; FLaRE, 2007; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Assessment and program design play crucial roles in the success of the students; research informed this selection. This study provided validity to this program. Expert teachers, who were impelled to learn and apply what works, became essential because combining courses as well as motivating students required expertise. Motive stems from shared goals (Eaker et al., 2006; Frijters, 2004; Lambert et al, 2002); students and teachers prevailed if the course caused increased progress and opportunities for students with exceptionalities to define career interests and remediate deficiencies. Did committed teachers with brilliant style and the skill required to form synergistic relationships that impel students (Frijters; Lindgren, 2006; Lones, 2004; Mullen &Lick, 1999) and help them prove their ability prevail?

Intersecting issues of students with exceptionalities at this central Florida high school caused the study team to work in collaboration with a range of specialists to facilitate interventions that would result in increased access to standards-based education. Therefore, leaders played a vital role in furthering student progress. The course evolved to include not only specific strategies for differentiated instruction of students with exceptionalities but also relationships and synergy to increase student progress. This process included theory and attention to research trends, law, and the intended

participants. Influential leaders cause societal change through teaching impelled by informed intellect and attitude (Walden University, 2007).

The 2007 FCAT results showed that students with exceptionalities comprised 24% of school-wide reading failure; 96% of these students had taken the intensive reading course prior to FCAT testing. These FCAT scores provoked this inquiry. Acts of school leaders provide a framework to understand and increase progress; as leaders apply theory to classify, summarize, explain, and predict phenomena, they research and create programs. An inquiry stance as well as shared leadership cause shared responsibility for the education of students with exceptionalities; this study could extend the database, validity, and trends to solve problems (Walden University, 2007).

Summary

To examine the impact of enrollment in the combined learning strategies and reading course, a review of literature regarding reading and standardized test research; increased leadership; and synergy, affect, and motivation formed the theoretical basis for this study. Although scholars have debated the appropriateness of standardized tests, this study aimed to determine, in accordance with Florida procedure, whether this course caused FCAT Reading progress. The next chapter describes the methodological framework of this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

This study explored programs for students with exceptionalities at one central Florida high school to determine whether implemented changes or a specific program intended to meet both federal and state performance-based standards affected test scores. As discussed in chapter 2, the purpose of the NCLB (2001) was to increase the academic performance of all students and educate them to function in a competitive society. The NCLB caused the restructuring of schools, placing an emphasis on accountability and assessment. Although standardized testing remains a controversial issue, the NCLB continues to hold schools accountable for performance using these tests. The FCAT is part of Florida's response and contains CRTs and NRTs to measure progress (FLDOE, 2007a). Students are required to meet increasingly rigorous standards, even when proficiencies exceed logical expectations for students with exceptionalities. Rapid changes in minimum standards and accommodations for disabilities have caused controversy because this subgroup significantly impacts school grades. There has been limited research on the impact of these guidelines on students with exceptionalities.

An inquiry stance as well as shared leadership causes shared responsibility for students with exceptionalities; leaders must uphold plans that extend expertise (Sonenblum, 2003). Although research provides the database, validity, and trends to problem solve, leaders must solve the right problems to cultivate a culture of learning (Schön, 1983). Comparing the pretest and posttest scores of students with exceptionalities

enrolled in a new program followed the accountability format of the NCLB (2001). This research on the effectiveness of this program may determine reform direction.

Research Design and Approach

The quasi-experimental repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was selected because this researcher studied recorded measures or FCAT Reading scale scores for a single group before and after a treatment, namely, enrollment in the combined course. Enrollment in the course was predetermined by the IEP team; thus, convenience sampling was used to measure the success of the group. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005),

> In many research situations, it is possible to use either a repeated-measures study or an independent-measures study to compare two treatment conditions. The independent-measures design would use two separate samples (one in each treatment condition) and the repeated-measures design would use only one sample with the same individuals in both treatments. The decision about which design to use is often made by considering the advantages and disadvantages of the two designs. In general, the repeated-measures design has most of the advantages. (p. 286)

For this study, the repeated-measures design was chosen because fewer participants were required than in an independent-measures design and the combined course had relatively few possible participants enrolled; thus, the repeated-measures design "is especially well suited for studying learning. . . over time" (Gravetter & Wallnau, p. 287), and the repeated-measures design "reduces or eliminates problems caused by individual differences" (Gravetter & Wallnau, p. 287).

All students enrolled in the combined course who had taken the 2007 and 2008 FCAT were included in this study. The participants were administered the pretest, or 2007, FCAT Reading test at the regular testing time for students in Florida in accordance

with state and local mandates before (in 2007) and after (in 2008) the treatment, which was enrollment in the combined course. The question of whether this program increased FCAT Reading scores for this group was investigated based on a comparison of the pretest and posttest scores.

According to Creswell (2003), the quasi-experimental approach was appropriate because the participants could not be randomly assigned as in a true experiment; this researcher studied recorded measures or FCAT reading test scores for a single group before and after a treatment (Creswell), that is, enrollment in the combined course. For this study, the participants were students with exceptionalities selected from the combined course. The repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was appropriate for testing knowledge claims through inquiry and test measures recommended by Creswell. Group scores were analyzed through test measures also recommended by Creswell.

This study tested a narrow hypothesis through the collection of data to support or refute the hypothesis. Convenience sampling was used to measure the success of this group. The question of whether this program impacted FCAT Reading scale scores was investigated based on a comparison of pretest, or 2007, and posttest, or 2008, scores.

The null hypothesis stated that there was no significant difference between the 2007 FCAT Reading pretest and the 2008 FCAT Reading posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course. The alternative hypothesis stated that there was a significant difference. The independent variable was enrollment in the combined course. The dependent variable was the FCAT Reading scale scores. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants from the combined course. The

pretest and posttest scores of the participants were retrieved from school records. These scores were analyzed using a related-samples *t* test. The FLDOE (2007a) has published strong reliability and validity ratings for FCAT.

A threat to validity existed because there was only one program from which to select the participants. By combining remedial reading and learning strategies standards into one course and forming relationships with the students, this differentiated model would meet, if not exceed, learning goals, as measured by the FCAT Reading scale scores. At the same time, it would allow the students to increase their progress toward matriculation. The purpose of this study was to determine whether enrollment in the combined course improved the students' FCAT Reading scale scores.

This quasi-experimental quantitative study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design compared the pretest and posttest FCAT Reading performances of 25 high school students with exceptionalities. These students were diagnosed with mild to moderate disabilities and were enrolled in the combined course at this central Florida high school. This study sought to determine whether there was a significant difference between scores to test the hypothesis that combining forms of remediation increases progress for students with exceptionalities. This study was based on the theory that innovative forms of instruction, supported by constructivist theorists, the NBPTS (2000), and the NRP (2000) lead to increased progress. This theory for individualized or differentiated instruction was used by the NRP to study reading programs that work, by Johnson et al. (2006) to study the effects of motivation on progress, and by Carriveau (2006) to study the effects of including students to design programs that work.

This premise is being applied nationwide to design programs to meet the requirements of the NCLB (2001) and in Florida to design intensive reading course curriculum and standards. This conjecture indicates that when education, remediation, and support are specifically designed to meet individualized data-based needs, assessment must inform instruction (NBPTS, 2000), and such instruction causes increased student progress. As applied to this study, this theory holds that the independent variable, or enrollment in the combined course, should positively influence the dependent variable, or the FCAT Reading scale scores, because differentiated remediation and support, including forming relationships and meeting specific student needs, increases student achievement.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Is there a significant difference between 2007 pretest and 2008 posttest FCAT Reading scale scores for students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course? If this study determined that the scores were significantly different, it would indicate that enrollment in the combined course impacted the FCAT Reading scale scores and met the remediation needs of these students.

H_0: There is no significant difference between 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course.

H_1: There is a significant difference between 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course.

Research Method

This study sought to determine whether there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the combined course and the FCAT Reading scale scores to test the theory that combining remediation and support increases exceptional student progress. This quasi-experimental quantitative study used a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design. The 2007 FCAT Reading scale scores served as the pretest, and the 2008 FCAT Reading scale score served as the posttest to compare the pre- and posttreatment performances of 25 high school students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course.

This study was based on the theory that innovative forms of individualized remediation, including forming relationships with students as supported by constructivist theorists, Armbruster et al. (2001), Carriveau (2006), and the NRP (2000) would lead to increased progress. This theory is being applied nationwide to design programs to meet NCLB (2001) requirements. When education, remediation, and support are designed to meet individualized needs, assessment must inform instruction, and such instruction causes increased student progress.

Population

The site for this study was a large central Florida high school with an enrollment of 2,917, which includes 324 students with exceptionalities. The FCAT results showed that exceptional students comprised 24% of 2007 school-wide reading failure. Ninety-six students with exceptionalities required the support of a learning strategies course, and 74 of these students required a learning strategies course and reading remediation. This

study focused on the 30 students enrolled in the combined course, but only included the 25 students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course who took the 2007 and 2008 FCAT.

Sampling

The participants were selected based upon enrollment in the combined course. Pretest, or 2007, FCAT Reading scale scores determined the need for remediation, and the IEP team determined placement. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Convenience sampling was appropriate because this researcher had access to this sample (Creswell, 2003). This sampling originated from predetermined placements.

This sample could not be random because the study included only students with exceptionalities enrolled in a specific program who took specific tests. The school population for students enrolled in learning strategies courses was 96 in August of 2007. The population of students with exceptionalities who required a learning strategies class and reading remediation was 74. The sampling included 25 students. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University, principal consent, and permission to collect required data were obtained. This sample included 26% of the current learning strategies population and 34% of the learning strategies population that also required reading remediation. The sample size was justified because it was a predetermined number and no students enrolled in the course who took both the pretest and posttest were excluded from study.

Instrumentation

Although standardized testing has been a long-term source of controversy in the field of education, federal, state, and local mandates attest to the validity of the FCAT. For the purpose of this study, the test served as a valid measure of student progress in accordance with the NCLB (2001) and Just Read Florida (2003) mandates. Once the exact number of participants ($N = 25$) was determined, the 2007 FCAT Reading scale, or pretest, scores were obtained from school records. This researcher obtained data, including interval FCAT Reading scale scores.

The FCAT is part of Florida's plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards (FLDOE, 2007a). This assessment contains two basic components, namely, CRTs measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards, in math, reading, writing, and science, and NRTs to measure performance against national norms in reading comprehension and math problem solving. Florida's first administration of the FCAT was in 1998, but the focus on educational accountability; the origin of student assessment and school accountability systems; and the development, administration, scoring and reporting of the FCAT began in 1991. The FCAT was intended to ensure that the population meets expectations. Student scores are used to identify students in need of improvement and assist with plans for said improvement. Only the scale scores from the Reading portion of the FCAT were used in this study. These scores provided pretest and posttest scores for the participants in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), a repeated-measures design "is especially well suited for studying learning, development, or other changes that take place over time. . . this design involves measuring individuals at one time and then returning to measure the same individuals at a later time" (p. 287). They also stated:

> A repeated-measures study is one in which a single sample of individuals is measured more than once on the same dependent variable. The same subjects are used in all of the treatment conditions. A repeated-measures study is often called a within-subjects study. The main advantage of a repeated measures study is that it uses exactly the same subjects in all treatment conditions. Thus, there is no risk that the subjects in one treatment are substantially different from the subjects in another. . . In a repeated-measures design, or a matched subjects design, the data consists of two sets of scores (two samples) with the scores in one sample directly related, one-to-one, with the scores in the second sample. For this reason, the two research designs are statistically equivalent and are grouped together under the common name *related-samples* designs. (pp. 275-276).

This study involved individuals in one sample who were measured more than once for the same dependent variable. The students were measured using the FCAT Reading scale score before and after treatment, or enrollment in the combined course. For all 25 participants, their 2007 FCAT Reading scale scores determined their placement in the program and inclusion in the study. The IEP team determined their course placement. Placement lists and convenience sampling were used to select the participants. This researcher obtained data, including interval FCAT Reading scale scores.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the pretest and posttest data was obtained, the scores were placed on an interval scale. These interval scores were placed on a comparison chart indicating performance. Specific data regarding FCAT reliability and validity is available on the

FLDOE (2007a) Web site. Because this assessment is mandated for use in determining achievement levels, placement, pupil progression, and school grades, it was determined appropriate for use in this study.

According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), the *t* statistic for related samples is based on difference scores. This is a repeated-measures pretest posttest design with the *t* based on difference scores. The first score for each person is the pretest. The second score is the posttest. Because this study focused on how the treatment affects FCAT Reading scores, the difference between the first and second score for each individual was computed. The difference scores were presented in the last column of Table 1 in chapter 4. The difference scores were obtained by subtracting the score before treatment from the score after treatment for each participant. The sample of difference scores served as the sample data for the hypothesis test. To compute the *t* statistic for this study, this researcher used SPSS software. The number of difference scores, the sample mean, and the value of the sum of squares were used. The level of significance was set at .05 for a two-tailed test. The critical region was located on the *t* distribution table. The *t* statistic was calculated and presented as a three-step process, as described by Gravetter and Wallnau. First, the variance for the sample was computed. Next, the sample variance was used to compute the estimated standard error, and then the sample mean and the hypothesized population mean were used with the estimated standard error to compute the value for the *t* and to determine if the *t* fell within the critical region.

Two tailed repeated-measures *t* tests with the alpha error set at the 0.05 level were performed to measure the between-group difference for the participants using their

pretest and posttest scores. The results included sample size, whether it was a statistically significant relationship, and the type of test used. This researcher's goal was to use the sample of difference scores to answer questions and determine whether there was a significant difference between pretest and posttest scores. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), using the sample of differences will show if there are any significant differences between the scores, which would answer the questions posed in this study.

The null hypothesis for this repeated-measures study stated that there was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores. This hypothesis refers to the mean for the entire population of difference scores. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), the mean difference for the general population is zero; any nonzero mean difference obtained is due to chance or error. According to this hypothesis, some individuals may show positive and some may show negative scores, but the differences are random: They will balance out to zero.

The alternative hypothesis stated that there was a treatment effect causing the scores in one test to be higher or lower. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), if the null hypothesis is rejected, the difference scores for individuals tend to be consistently positive or negative, indicating a predictable difference: The mean of differences does not equal zero. The hypothesis test answered this question using scores from the participants to evaluate the mean difference.

Of the 96 students with exceptionalities enrolled in learning strategies courses in this central Florida high school, 74 required reading remediation. Twenty-five students who were enrolled in the combined course were the participants for this study and were

drawn through convenience sampling. Interval data from the 2007 FCAT Reading scales pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores were compared. Data were obtained from school records that were made available to this researcher. This researcher obtained permission from the school principal to review the students' records. This researcher reviewed the records and collected data pertaining to each participant's demographics, including grade level, disability, ethnicity, gender, IEP placement, and FCAT Reading scale scores. Reading scores and placement were documented and considered the dependent and independent variables for this study. Pretest and posttest scores were documented to determine whether a significant difference existed.

Protection of Participants' Rights

All participant data became available to this researcher based on permission obtained from the principal of this central Florida high school. This research was approved by Walden University's IRB (approval #09-26-08-0326191) prior to data collection. Information that could lead to participant or school information was removed from the final report of results. The information was used solely for this study and was kept in a separate, locked file cabinet or in electronic form on this researcher's password-protected files and computer. The results were made available to the school principal for appropriate dissemination and use for remediation and curriculum as well as teaching practices.

Summary of Research Method

This researcher compared the pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of students enrolled in an innovative program at one central Florida high school to

determine whether enrollment in the combined course had a significant impact on the test scores of students. The study was conducted using the pretest and posttest scores of the participants for comparison. This study explored the performance of these students before and after a treatment. The FCAT Reading pretest and posttest scores were analyzed to determine whether the new course serves the purpose of both the remediation and the support courses. If the scores were significantly different, the new course would meet both the remediation and support needs of exceptional students in one efficient block.

This researcher evaluated literature and discussed the concepts pertaining to the instruction in the combined course, as well as the need for this course to increase exceptional student achievement and provide equitable options for the education of these students. The study revealed the effectiveness of this effort to create an efficient and equitable program. The question remains: Does a significant difference exist between 2007 and 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores for students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course? The impact of the NCLB (2001) was strong in required changes, mandates, and performances of this population. This study investigated the impact of this course on the FCAT Reading scores of one central Florida high school exceptional student population to meet NCLB demands.

At this central Florida high school, the 2007 FCAT results showed that exceptional students comprise 24% of school-wide reading failure. This study focused on the 30 students with exceptionalities that comprise the combined course at this school. This researcher believed that this group was appropriate for the study because of the implementation of the combined course standards with an emphasis on forming

relationships and using individualized differentiated instruction to increase motivation to read and reading skills hence overall performance.

Because 5 students withdrew before taking the 2008 FCAT, this researcher analyzed the pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of 25 students with exceptionalities who were enrolled in the combined course. This sample could not be selected randomly because the study included only students with exceptionalities enrolled in one specific program at one specific school who took two specific tests. The students with exceptionalities working toward a standard high school diploma enrolled in learning strategies courses was 96 in August of 2007. Seventy-four of these students also required reading remediation. The sampling of this population included 25 students from the combined course. This sample justified 34% of the current learning strategies population that also required reading remediation at this central Florida high school. The sample was predetermined based on IEP and enrollment in the appropriate course. The sample size was justified because it was a predetermined number and no students enrolled in the combined course were excluded from the study. Permission to access data was obtained from the principal of this central Florida high school.

Summary

This chapter identified the design components, methodology, and procedures to conduct this study. This chapter contained the purpose and an explanation of the research design for this study. This chapter included the population and sampling, as well as a detailed explanation of the rationale for the study. A summary of the instrument and an explanation of its reliability and validity were included. A detailed description of the

FCAT was included to facilitate an understanding of the selection and purpose of this instrument. Tools, validity, reliability, variables, treatment, and procedure were identified and discussed. The data and methods for obtaining and using the data were described. Also discussed was the data analysis, with particular detail to procedures for the results and conclusions of this study. The participants' protection and rights was described. The remaining chapters include the results of the study as well as this researcher's conclusions and recommendations for future study.

The literature section of this study began with the historical background of the impact of the FCAT on Florida students and took the reader through mandates that have changed the method and program choices for students with exceptionalities. The literature review continued by providing an outline of the combined course as well as the current method of remediation and support for these students. In this section, this researcher described the components of each model then elaborated on the importance of forming relationships that increase synergy to meet the needs of these students.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

Because performance-based national and state governments study institutions using standardized test scores as a measure of success, this study was designed to show whether a specific program at one school was effective. This program was intended to meet both federal and state standards and influence these assessments for students with mild to moderate exceptionalities. The purpose of the NCLB (2001) was to increase educational expectations by improving the academic performance of students and educating them in a manner that would enable them to function in a competitive society (FLDOE, 2007a). The NCLB caused the restructuring of schools, placing an emphasis on accountability and assessment to determine whether schools are successful. As discussed in chapter 2, using standardized tests to determine whether schools are successful remains a controversial issue in education, but the NCLB continues to hold schools accountable for student performance using these tests (Carriveau, 2006).

The FCAT is part of Florida's response to the NCLB (FLDOE, 2007a); this assessment contains CRTs as well as NRTs to measure student performance. All students, including those with identified disabilities, were required to meet increasingly rigorous proficiency standards. For this study, limited research about how these guidelines affected students with exceptionalities was found. In the literature review, rapid changes made in reference to student assessment and school accountability in Florida were acknowledged. Students who failed to meet proficiency standards or earn passing FCAT scores were enrolled in remedial courses to address their deficiencies. Many exceptional

students were enrolled in these remedial courses as well as support courses required by their IEPs. The combined reading and learning strategies course was an innovative plan designed to address this problem at one central Florida high school.

Because the NCLB (2001) set the criteria for accountability for all students, including students with exceptionalities, comparing the pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of students with mild to moderate exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course followed the assessment and accountability format. Research on the effectiveness of this program through an examination of the FCAT Reading scale scores was used to determine whether the new program was successful. This study offers an expanded perspective to guide reform movements and help teachers to teach more effectually. Educators seek ways to support students with mild to moderate exceptionalities that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. The combination of reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy provided a viable solution to this problem. Therefore, exploring the impact of the combined course on FCAT scores became essential because students with mild to moderate exceptionalities form a major subgroup of the NCLB (2001) that comprises more than 10% of this central Florida high school population. Students with exceptionalities have a significant impact on school grades. Research has suggested that leaders should enact precise plans that have proven valid with these students (Armbruster et al., 2001). Therefore, this researcher conducted this study to determine whether the combined program was successful.

Study Design

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this quasi-experimental study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was to compare the pretest, or 2007, FCAT Reading scale scores of 30 high school students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course with their posttest, or 2008, FCAT Reading scale scores. The intent was to determine whether there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the course and FCAT Reading scale scores to test the theory that combining remediation and support increased students' progress toward proficiency and graduation. The independent variable was enrollment in the combined course. The dependent variable was the FCAT Reading scale scores. By including students in the combined course, they could enroll in required courses and electives previously unavailable to them. This researcher supported the contention that students with exceptionalities engaged in the combined course can spend more time outside of the course learning and matriculating beside their mainstream peers. This study may show that these students can significantly increase their FCAT Reading scale scores while enrolled in only one remedial and support class. The best way to support the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of this course was to use FCAT scores in accordance with state mandates to determine the level of progress for the students enrolled.

Although 30 students were enrolled in the combined course, this study included 25 because 5 withdrew prior to 2008 FCAT testing. Of the 25 students, 5 were female, and 20 were male. There were 8 students in Grade 9, 11 in Grade 10, 5 in Grade 11, and 1 in Grade 12. Fifteen students were White, 6 were Hispanic, and 4 were Black. Twenty

participants were served as specific learning disabled (SLD), 1 as other health impaired, 1 as language impaired, 1 as emotionally handicapped, 1 as autistic spectrum disorders, and 1 as educable mentally handicapped. All 25 students were enrolled in the combined course, were working toward earning their standard high school diploma, and had taken the 2007 and 2008 FCAT Reading test. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. The participants' 2007 and 2008 FCAT scores, which were used for the pretest and posttest, were retrieved from school records. These scores were analyzed using a repeated measures *t* test.

Because the data consisted of difference scores rather than pairs of scores, the repeated measures *t* test was performed by entering the difference scores in one column and using the One Sample *t* Test option, entering a value of zero in the Test Value box of SPSS (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2005). The FCAT has published strong reliability and validity ratings. A threat to validity existed in that only one program existed from which to select the participants. By combining remedial reading and learning strategies standards into one course, this researcher hoped that this differentiated model would meet, if not exceed, the remedial and support needs of these students to increase learning, as measured by increased FCAT scores. Increasing these scores will help these students meet the requirements of NCLB. This study intended to show that combining courses, thus enabling these students to enroll in more required courses, also facilitated higher FCAT Reading scale scores.

The quasi-experimental quantitative repeated-measures pretest-posttest design tested recorded measures, or FCAT Reading scale scores, for a single group before and

after a treatment, that is, enrollment in the combined course. All 25 participants were administered the Reading portion of the 2007 and 2008 FCAT at the regular testing time for students in Florida in accordance with state and local mandates before (in 2007) and after (in 2008) the treatment or enrollment in the combined course. The question of whether this program increased the FCAT Reading scores for this group was investigated based on a comparison between pretest and posttest scores. The Reading scale scores of these tests were used as the pretest and posttest for this study. Difference scores were entered into SPSS, which was used to conduct a repeated-measures *t* hypothesis test.

The repeated-measures design is also well suited for studying learning over time and it "reduces or eliminates problems caused by individual differences" (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2005, p. 287). All students enrolled in the combined course who had taken the 2007 and 2008 FCAT were included in this study. Enrollment in the course was the independent variable, and the FCAT Reading scale score was the independent variable. In addition to enrollment and test data, demographic information, including race, gender, disability, and grade level, was collected and included in the raw data.

To address the research question, the participants' difference scores were entered into SPSS, which was used to conduct a repeated-measures *t* hypothesis test. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2005), the formula to compute the degrees of freedom for the repeated-measures two-tailed test at the alpha level of .05 is $df = n - 1$. Therefore, the formula for the data in this study was $df = 25 - 1 = 24$. Upon consulting the *t* distribution table for a two-tailed test with alpha = .05 for $df = 24$, the critical *t* values for the critical

region were t = positive, or negative 2.064. A t score greater than or equal to 2.064 would have been significant.

The first step in computing the repeated-measures t statistic was to calculate the basic descriptive statistics for the sample data. The difference scores, or D values, were found using the formula D = X2 - X1, then the sample mean SS was computed for the D scores (see Table 1).

Table 1

Difference Scores

Participant	X1	X2	*D*
1	285	291	6
2	291	301	10
3	268	306	38
4	266	354	58
5	274	279	5
6	263	310	47
7	298	303	5
8	186	233	47
9	321	317	-4
10	274	303	29
11	336	339	3
12	286	225	-61
13	287	286	-1
14	271	283	12
15	284	317	33
16	294	327	28
17	182	246	64
18	308	328	20
19	297	251	-46
20	165	309	144
21	307	240	-67
22	303	306	3
23	318	340	22
24	286	316	30
25	279	303	24

Analysis of the Findings

The analysis included data based on the difference scores from the 2007 (pretest) and 2008 (posttest) Reading portion of the FCAT. A repeated-measures t test was used to

determine whether enrollment in the combined course (independent variable) impacted The FCAT Reading scale scores (dependent variable). Data pertaining to enrollment and test scores was obtained from school records. The difference scores were computed and analyzed as the dependent variable. The mean score from this one-sample test was 21.64, and the standard deviation was 39.852. A repeated-measures *t* test based on difference scores was performed to determine whether the scores were significant (see Tables 2 & 3).

Table 2

Statistics for Repeated-Measures t Test Based on Difference Scores

	One-sample statistics			
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
Difference	25	21.64	39.852	7.970

Table 3

Repeated-Measures t Test Based on Difference Scores

	One-sample test					
	Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Difference	2.715	24	.012	21.640	5.19	38.09

As is evident in Table 3, there was a significant difference at the .05 level between pretest and posttest scores.

Null Hypothesis

The null hypothesis stated that there was no significant difference between the 2007 FCAT Reading pretest and the 2008 FCAT Reading posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course. The *t* statistic (2.715) indicated that this researcher should reject the null hypothesis because there was a significant difference.

Research Question

Does a significant difference exist between 2007 pretest and 2008 posttest FCAT Reading scale scores for students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course? This question was answered based on the data provided by this study. Based on the *t* statistic, there was a significant difference between pretest and posttest FCAT Reading scale scores of students enrolled in the combined course.

Interpretation of the Results

Because the combined course was a new program in response to the problem that exceptional students face because of federal and state mandates, an investigation regarding its effectiveness became necessary. The course was taught by a dual-certified teacher who was able to provide a rigorous class that not only addressed the standards of two separate courses in one remedial and support block but also enabled the enrolled students to access course options available to their mainstream peers. The results of this study indicated that the combined course had a positive affect on the scores of the students enrolled.

Further Analysis

Two supplemental analyses were run. The first was run to ensure that the outliers were not masking a significant overall relationship (see Tables 4 & 5).

Table 4

Statistics for Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample statistics			
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
Difference	21	17.57	22.690	4.951

Table 5

Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample test					
	Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Difference	3.549	20	.002	17.571	7.24	27.90

Although the analyses showed that the outliers did partially mask a relationship, a significant overall relationship was still found.

Next, to determine if both categories of Exceptional Student Education groups with mild to moderate disabilities, or the SLD group, and the Others group resulted in a significant relationship, further analyses were run (see Tables 6 to 13).

Table 6

Statistics for SLD Difference

	One-sample statistics			
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
Difference	21	17.57	22.690	4.951

Table 7

SLD Difference

	One-sample test					
	Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Difference	3.549	20	.002	17.571	7.24	27.90

Table 8

Statistics for SLD Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample statistics			
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
SLD difference	20	26.20	40.086	8.964

Table 9

SLD Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample test Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
SLD difference	2.923	19	.009	26.200	7.44	44.96

Table 10

Statistics for Others Difference

One-sample statistics				
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
Others difference	5	3.40	37.099	16.591

Table 11

Others Difference

	One-sample test Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Lower	Upper
Others difference	.205	4	.848	3.400	-42.66	49.46

Table 12

Statistics for Others Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample statistics			
	N	*M*	*SD*	*SEM*
Others no outlier	4	19.50	10.344	5.172

Table 13

Others Difference Without Outliers

	One-sample test					
	Test value = 0					
					95% confidence interval of the difference	
	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Others no outlier	3.770	3	.033	19.500	3.04	35.96

Because both Exceptional Student Education groups of students with mild to moderate disabilities, SLD and Others, resulted in significant relationships, the two groups could be safely eliminated and the one group of students with mild to moderate exceptionalities could be used for the overall analysis.

Summary of the Results

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was to compare the pretest or 2007 FCAT Reading scale scores of high school students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course with their posttest or 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores. This study indicated that there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the course and FCAT Reading scale scores. The

theory that combining remediation and support increases students' progress toward proficiency and graduation was supported by these results.

By including students in the combined course, they were able to enroll in required courses and electives previously unavailable to them. This researcher supported the contention that students with exceptionalities engaged in the combined course could spend more time outside of the course learning and matriculating beside their mainstream peers. This study indicated that these students could significantly increase their FCAT Reading scale scores while enrolled in only one remedial and support class. The best way to support the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of this course was to use FCAT scores in accordance with state mandates to determine the level of progress for the students enrolled in the combined course.

This study also indicated that combining remedial reading and learning strategies standards into one course and forming relationships with the students in this differentiated model met and, in many cases, exceeded learning goals, as measured by the FCAT Reading scale scores. At the same time, these students were able to increase their progress toward matriculation. The purpose of this study was to determine whether enrollment in the combined course improved FCAT Reading scale scores, and the results indicated that enrollment did improve these scores. This study was based on the theory that innovative forms of instruction, supported by constructivist theorists, the NBPTS (2000), and the NRP (2000) would lead to increased progress. This theory for individualized or differentiated instruction was used by the NRP to study reading programs that work, by Johnson et al. (2006) to study the effects of motivation on

progress, and by Carriveau (2006) to study the effects of including students to design programs that work.

This premise is being applied nationwide to design programs to meet the requirements of the NCLB (2001) and in Florida to design intensive reading course curriculum and standards. This conjecture indicates that when education, remediation, and support are specifically designed to meet individualized data-based needs, assessment must inform instruction (NBPTS, 2000), and such instruction causes increased student progress. As applied to this study, this theory holds that the independent variable, or enrollment in the combined course, positively influenced the dependent variable, or the FCAT Reading scale scores, because differentiated remediation and support, including forming relationships and meeting specific student needs, increased student achievement.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, SUMMARY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this quasi-experimental study using a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design was to compare the pretest, or 2007, FCAT Reading scale scores of high school students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course with their posttest, or 2008, FCAT Reading scale scores. This study intended to determine whether there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the program and FCAT Reading scale scores to test the theory that combining remediation and support increased student progress toward proficiency and graduation. The independent variable was enrollment in the combined course. The dependent variable was the FCAT Reading scale scores. Including students with exceptionalities in the combined course allowed them to enroll in required courses and electives previously unavailable to them. This researcher supported the contention that students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course could spend more time outside of the course learning new skills and matriculating beside their mainstream peers. The goal of this study was to show that these students could significantly increase their FCAT Reading scale scores while enrolled in only one remedial and support class. The best way to determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of this course was to use FCAT scores in accordance with state mandates to determine the level of progress for the students enrolled.

Twenty-five students identified with specific learning disabilities or other mild to moderate disabilities participated in this study. The 2007 and 2008 FCAT Reading scale scores were used as the pretest and posttest. Difference scores were used to determine

whether there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the participants. All of the participants attended one central Florida high school, had mild to moderate disabilities, were enrolled in the combined course, and took the 2007 and the 2008 FCAT Reading examination.

Information pertaining to grade, gender, ethnicity, disability, and FCAT Reading scale scores was obtained from school records for each participant. FCAT difference scores were analyzed as the dependent variable for this study. Repeated-measures *t* tests were conducted using difference scores. The findings of this study indicated that there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study sought to determine whether there was a significant difference to test the theory that combining remediation and support would increase exceptional student progress. The results of this study supported the alternative hypothesis by indicating that there was a significant difference between the 2007 FCAT Reading scale pretest scores and 2008 FCAT Reading scale posttest scores of students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined reading and learning strategies course. This quasi-experimental quantitative study used a repeated-measures pretest-posttest design. The pre- and posttreatment performances of 25 high school students with exceptionalities enrolled in the combined course were analyzed, and a significant difference was found.

This study was based on the theory that innovative forms of individualized remediation, including forming relationships with students, as supported by constructivist theorists, Armbruster et al (2001), Carriveau (2006), and the NRP (2000), would lead to

increased progress. This theory is being applied nationwide to design programs to meet NCLB (2001) requirements. When education, remediation, and support are designed to meet individualized needs, assessment must inform instruction, and such instruction causes increased student progress. This study supported this research in its finding that there was a significant difference for these students.

Implications for Social Change

Influential leaders cause societal change through teaching impelled by informed intellect and attitude (Walden University, 2007). To drive programs to excel, this study served to determine whether there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the combined course and FCAT Reading scale scores. Shared results could lead to growth, defined as increased FCAT scores, grades, and rates of matriculation for other students at this school. The results of this study could inform student as well as educator attitudes and intellect that shape future reform and instruction. Because the results were positive, not only this central Florida high school population but also students with exceptionalities in the district and throughout Florida could benefit from enrollment in similar programs.

Acts of school leaders provide a framework to understand and increase progress; as leaders apply theory to classify, summarize, explain, and predict phenomena, they research and create programs (Eaker et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2002). The development of similar programs may cause results similar to those in this study. An inquiry stance as well as shared leadership cause shared responsibility for students with exceptionalities; further research could extend the database, validity, and trends to solve problems

(Walden University, 2007) for students in similar situations. The study included quantitative data, which was crucial information used to determine program success, or lack thereof.

The combined course increased exceptional students' progress, as defined by increased FCAT Reading scale scores. This inquiry may lead to congruent programs for other NCLB (2001) subgroups. Once programs that work become evident, the questions of further study to produce increased learning gains arise. Data suggested focus on the 24% exceptional populous of the FCAT failure group; further inquiry showed the need for narrowing the focal point to the students enrolled in the combined course. This study served to address questions of more efficient program design to cause increased progress (Johnson et al., 2006). Because test scores, plans, and designs, played central roles in study success, research informed these choices. The combined course included combined research-based, essential strategies taught by a highly qualified, motivated professional who worked to increase synergy. The framework for the program balanced concerns through standards, methods, materials, teachers, and synergistic teaching to increase progress.

This study offers an expanded perspective to educators and researchers to guide reform movements. Educators must find ways to support exceptional students that promote matriculation and entry into productive adulthood. Combining reading and learning strategies standards into a single course to cause synergy, or progress, provided a viable solution to this problem. This topic became essential because exceptional students form a major subgroup of the NCLB (2001) that includes more than 10% of the school

population. Students with exceptionalities have a significant impact upon school grades, which are comprised of state and federal ratings. The extension of this program and the creation of similar programs also may decrease dropout rates as levels of matriculation continue to increase.

Armbruster et al. (2001) suggested the need to enact precise plans proven valid with these students. This research indicated that this program worked for these students. Programs selected for use in the course were research based and played a crucial role in the success of the study. Expert teachers, impelled to learn and apply what works, became and remain essential to further progress. Combining courses as well as forming relationships with students required expertise; teachers had to have the drive to succeed and reach the participants. Motive stemmed from shared goals (Eaker et al., 2002; Frijters, 2004; Lambert, 2002). The study indicated that progress increased: Providing opportunities for students with exceptionalities to define career interests and remediate deficiencies simultaneously worked. Theory and research formed the questions for this study. The committed teacher with the style and the skill required to teach both course standards and form synergistic relationships that impelled students (Frijters; Lindgren, 2006; Lones, 2004) prevailed and set the tone for social change, including the format of remediation and increased mainstream enrollment at this school and in the district.

Recommendations for Action

Studying other subgroups through further inquiry may help to decrease the failure rate while increasing student enrollment in required courses as well as elective courses of interest to individual students. The development of similar programs for these

populations may cause results as similar to those in this study. This study served to determine that there was a significant relationship between enrollment in the combined course and FCAT Reading scale scores. Because the shared results could lead to growth, defined as increased FCAT scores, grades, and rates of matriculation for other students at this school, these results should be shared to develop similar programs for this population as well as other populations that make up the bottom quartile of the school.

Although these programs may not have the same effect on other populations, similar programs should be considered. For example, similar programs combining support and remediation could be developed for students with limited English proficiency; students served under 504 Disabilities Act; and students in each of these populations who fail the Math, Science, and Writing portions of the FCAT. The results of this study could inform student as well as educator attitudes and intellect that shape future reform and instruction. This research indicated that enrollment in the combined course increased the students' success. This central Florida high school's 2007 FCAT results showed that even though exceptional students comprised 24% of school-wide reading failure, 96% of these students had taken the intensive reading course prior to FCAT testing. These test scores provoked this inquiry.

Recommendations for Further Study

An inquiry stance as well as shared leadership caused shared responsibility for students with exceptionalities; further research could extend the database, validity, and trends to solve problems for students in similar situations (Walden University, 2007). Further study should include quantitative data, which was crucial information used to

determine program success, but future research should be expanded to include qualitative research to determine the cause of extreme outliers and the failure of a limited number of participants in this study. Surveys, interviews, and observations may help to identify the factors that contributed to the scores of the outliers in this study. The application of the research set the stage for the study, and the shared results completed the research cycle and provided the basis for further study at this central Florida high school, in the district, and in neighboring districts.

The combined course increased the progress of exceptional students, as defined by increased FCAT Reading scale scores. This inquiry may lead to congruent programs for other NCLB (2001) subgroups. Qualitative research may provide specific information, including possible reasons for extraordinary progress, or the lack thereof. Once programs that work become evident, questions of further study to produce increased learning gains arise. Further research, including qualitative study, may help to explore possibilities for even stronger gains with similar populations. Data suggested a focus on the 24% exceptional populous of the FCAT failure group; further inquiry showed the need for narrowing the focal point to the students enrolled in the combined course. Future studies may lead to data determining possible courses of action for continuous progress. This study served to address questions of more efficient program design to cause increased progress (Johnson et al., 2006). Because test scores, plans, and designs, played central roles in study success, research informed these choices. Surveys, interviews, and observations may provide qualitative data to refine the program and design programs for other students.

This study offers an expanded perspective to educators and researchers to guide reform movements. Further study should include research to determine what other programs work for these students at this school. Other populations have a similar impact upon the school; future research should expand to determine what programs work for those populations and whether similar programs could be designed to increase their progress. Extension of this program and creation of similar programs may also decrease drop out rates as levels of matriculation continue to increase.

Armbruster et al. (2001) suggested the need to enact precise plans proven valid with these students. This research indicated that this program worked for these students. Future research should inform similar selections for other populations at this school. Expert teachers, impelled to learn and apply what works, became essential and remain essential to further progress. Combining courses as well as forming relationships with students required expertise; motive stemmed from shared goals (Eaker et al., 2002; Frijters, 2004; Lambert, 2002). Students and teachers prevailed because the study indicated increased progress, which supports providing opportunities for students with exceptionalities to define career interests and remediate deficiencies simultaneously. Theory and research formed the questions for this study. Committed teachers with brilliant style and the skill required to teach both course standards and form synergistic relationships that impel students (Frijters, 2004; Lindgren, 2006; Lones, 2004) prevailed and set the tone for social change, including the format of remediation and increased mainstream enrollment at this school and in the district.

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